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# Solidarity but not similarity?

## LGBT communities in the twenty-first century



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## Glossary of terms

Asexual - person or people who do not experience, or act upon, sexual attraction

Bi - short for 'bisexual'

BiCon - national bisexual convention held every year in the UK

Biphobia - Fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of bisexual people

BME - Black and minority ethnic

Cisgendered - person whose gender identity conforms to society's expectations of their gender. Sometimes referred to as the 'opposite' of transgendered

Heteronormative - an assumption that heterosexuality is the 'normal' or 'superior' sexual identity

Heterophobia - Fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of heterosexual people

Heterosexism - discrimination that favours heterosexual people or relationships over LGB people/relationships. Includes the assumption of heterosexuality and/or belief that heterosexuality is 'normal'

Homogeneity - being 'homogenous' i.e. the same

Homophobia - Fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of lesbian and gay people (also sometimes used to include bisexual people)

LGB - Lesbian, gay and bisexual

LGBT - Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans

Pansexual - person or people who are attracted to people of all genders. Sometimes used as alternative term to bisexual or polysexual

Polyamorous - person or people who have multiple concurrent romantic/sexual relationships

Polysexual - person or people who are attracted to multiple genders. Sometimes used as alternative term to bisexual or pansexual

Queer - Alternative term sometimes used for LGB or LGBT by those seeking to 'reclaim' it from previous/current derogatory usage. Also used to refer to those wishing to challenge gender or sexual binaries

Section 28 - Section of the Local Government Act 1988 which prohibited the 'promotion' of homosexuality as a "pretended family relationship". It was repealed in Scotland in 2000 and in the rest of the UK in 2003

Trans - Umbrella term used to refer to people who may not identify as either 'male' or 'female' and/or who may identify as intersex, transgender, transsexual or transvestite

Transphobia - Fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of trans people

# Executive summary

## Introduction to the study

The term 'LGBT community' is increasingly used in policy, practice and research, yet there is little explicit discussion of what the application of the concept of 'community' means to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people. This study therefore sought to examine understandings and experiences of LGBT communities, and assess implications for (LGBT) health and wellbeing. The study had two elements: first to bring together existing (predominantly UK) literature from a range of subject disciplines, including geography, health studies, history, psychology and sociology; second to consult with a range of LGBT people via an interactive website, short online survey (627 respondents), and a series of in-depth interviews and discussion groups (44 participants). Question areas were geared towards understanding views on, and experiences of, communities currently, in the past, and in the future. This summary gives a very brief overview of the themes and issues emerging within the research.

## Understandings of 'community'

### *Language use: acronyms, labels and meanings*

- Concerns were raised about the LGBT acronym itself, related to 'ownership', agency and diversity
- Some people felt that trans issues were, but did not belong, "stuck on the end" of LGB, whilst others felt that there was 'strength in numbers' in combining particular gender and sexual identities together
- There was some consensus that the complexities of identity cannot easily be encapsulated in an acronym, but at the same time a desire for an understandable 'label' with which to describe oneself and share with others (however there were clear concerns about being labelled by other people)
- Participants also identified an advantage in a label or acronym facilitating visibility and (the potential for) appropriate service provision
- The associated invisibility of other identity "options" (such as pansexual and polysexual) was problematic for some participants

### *Identifying communities*

- There was some consensus that the word community has generally become more widely used to describe groups of people, which not everyone felt was appropriate
- Ownership was again highlighted in that some people did not want to be positioned in an LGBT community because of their particular gender or sexual identity
- Apprehension that the word community could contribute to stereotypes and/or social 'divisions' was identified
- The concept of one universal LGBT community was viewed with cynicism, or sometimes anger
- Advantages to the concept of community were also suggested, however, especially when pushing for legislative or social change; it was believed that community implied strength and credibility
- Use of communities in the plural was viewed more positively as this recognised the diversity within and between particular communities, for example regarding age, ethnicity, gender or social class
- Some people suggested that 'heterosexual allies' should be included within LGBT communities

### *Community as 'space'*

- 'Space' featured prominently in understandings of community, often focussed on the commercial scene which, whether or not individuals engaged with this space, could operate as an important visible, and to a certain extent symbolic, sight of safety, connection and/or identity validation

- For some people, ‘the scene’ and other geographical spaces (sometimes referred to as ‘visual communities’) took on almost legendary status which contrasted with lived experiences of unequal access, whether related to geographical inability (because ‘LGBT spaces’ are often concentrated in specific urban areas) or linked to individual circumstances such as age, disability, ethnicity, gender or lack of financial resources
- Existing literature has also examined rural gay and lesbian geographies, and the place of private homes and/or temporary spaces within the concept of community, particularly for lesbians (Bell and Valentine, 1995a; Johnston and Valentine, 1995; Valentine, 1993a, 1994)
- Around half of survey respondents identified that the community or communities they felt part of were physical and near where they lived (53%), virtual/online (48%) and/or ‘a feeling’ (48%) (responses were not mutually exclusive)
- Other LGBT communities identified within the survey included work-based communities, university-based communities and particular social groups
- Particular spaces were thought to provide comfort and/or safety that was not necessarily felt elsewhere; a potentially negative broader social context was often the reason that people chose to socialise ‘on the scene’
- There were some concerns about the scene, however, whether related to the quality of venues and/or perceived risks of LGBT people isolating themselves
- Notions of communities tied to scenes were particularly problematic for young people (aged under 18) who could not (yet) access the scene (legally) which meant their ability to meet other LGBT people could be limited, outside of specific social/support groups
- An understanding of community as space was also applied to particular events (such as Pride) and/or specific social/support groups away from the scene
- Some participants clearly felt that the scene did not constitute a community

### *Community as ‘feeling’ or ‘connection’*

- Existing literature has identified communities of ‘identity’ or ‘interest’ (Weeks et al, 2001), as well as ‘imagined’ communities (Anderson, 1983), meaning that community can be understood as ‘place’ (as above) and/or ‘practice’ (Weeks et al, 2001)
- These theories could be applied to data from this study which strongly suggested perceived communities based on a ‘feeling’, mutual understanding and/or assumed ‘connection’
- Sometimes this was related to a feeling of ‘belonging’ or ‘acceptance’, and sometimes it was more concretely linked to shared experiences of ‘coming out’ and/or hostility within wider society
- This was particularly significant when individuals felt or were excluded from their ‘families of origin’ and/or broader communities (see also Weeks et al, 2001)
- Communities of ‘choice’ or ‘need’ may therefore be distinguished from communities of ‘fate’, i.e. the ones we are born into (Homfray, 2007; Howes, 2011)
- There was often an acknowledgment of diversity within and between LGBT communities, for instance linked to age, (dis)ability, ethnicity, geography, gender, political affiliation, social class and/or wealth
- This meant that although there was often a sense of solidarity, participants were also clear that this did not mean similarity
- Not having to ‘self-censor’ was key; many participants talked about wanting to feel comfortable or relaxed whilst holding their partner’s hand, for example, which some felt was only possible with other LGBT people
- Not everyone felt they had a connection or things in common with other LGBT people; for instance sometimes people tended to socialise just with other lesbians or gay men
- Connecting with other LGBT people was seen to be particularly important whilst ‘coming out’
- Some people sought or found friendship with other LGBT people who were identified as “like-minded”, suggesting that there could be “communities within communities” (which could overlap and were sometimes expressed as ‘networks’)

## *Risks and omissions*

- Because not everyone is 'accepted' or feels they 'belong' within LGBT communities, some participants questioned the usefulness of drawing on the concept of community
- People identified that services delivered to LGBT communities were sometimes only delivered to particular elements of LGBT communities, with bisexual and trans people identified as frequently excluded or ignored

## **Community development and engagement**

### *Socialising and 'connection'*

- Participants identified wanting to engage in/with LGBT communities for a variety of reasons, one of which was to socialise or interact with other LGBT people
- Ability to meet 'like-minded' people was seen as important in aiding 'connection' and/or mutual support
- Some people believed that communities had not facilitated friendships, because communities *were* friendships
- Sometimes the role of organised social and/or support groups in facilitating friendship was highlighted
- Being able to meet and/or socialise with other LGBT people was identified as particularly important when people were making a 'new start', which could be in a new geographical area, or might relate to personal circumstances, such as a relationship ending
- Participants also talked about the role of LGBT communities when seeking sex and/or partners

### *Avoiding broader social contexts; creating new communities*

- Much discussion of how specific LGBT communities developed was in relation to broader (negative) social contexts; many participants felt that the friendships, groups or communities they formed were directly related to social contexts, for example described as "oppressive" or "less comfortable"
- The perceived need to escape the 'self-censorship' that many participants engaged in, in wider society was clear, which meant (some) people looked for safe (LGBT) spaces without the need to "edit" themselves

### *Politics, activism and seeking social change*

- A key area that participants identified as contributing to the development of communities was in relation to activism and particular political campaigns
- The Stonewall 'riots' in New York, the campaign to repeal Section 28 and 'equal marriage' were the specific examples most often cited
- It was highlighted that such examples of activism/campaigning brought people together and helped form or strengthen friendships and communities
- Not everyone was interested in politics, however, which was a cause of lament for some
- A number of participants emphasised the need for communities to be 'vigilant' about potential attacks on LGBT rights, so that people could 'mobilise' if/when necessary

## **Experiences of 'community' and impacts for wellbeing**

### *Inclusion, exclusion and 'diversity'*

- The survey asked people to say whether they felt part of one or more LGBT communities: the largest proportion of respondents (48%) 'somewhat' felt part of one or more LGBT communities, followed by those that 'strongly' did so (25%), and those that did not feel part of one or more LGBT communities, or did not know (27%)



- There were a variety of examples of communities and/or spaces being experienced as unwelcoming and/or exclusionary, in addition to spaces that were felt to be less appealing and/or appropriate for some people
- A number of issues were raised relating to diversity and potential exclusion (or 'hierarchies') within and between communities, including awareness or experience of ableism, ageism, biphobia, 'fatphobia', racism and transphobia
- The scene was described by a range of participants as 'male-dominated' and/or specifically focussed on young gay men
- Social class, 'privilege' and/or (lack of) financial resources were seen to be significant, with some participants clear that the 'pink pound' is not a 'reality' for everybody
- Intersections of faith and sexual identity were also raised, and have been discussed more fully elsewhere (see e.g. Browne et al, 2010; Duggan, 2012; Hunt, 2009; Yip, 1996, 2008)
- Some LGBT parents suggested that they did not always find it easy to find a 'place' for themselves within LGBT communities that were described by some as not child-friendly, yet the desire for visible LGBT communities to demonstrate the 'normality' of same sex relationships to their children was identified
- As a whole, data clearly pointed to the diversity of experience that may be overlooked in assumptions and/or language use relating to LGBT community, particularly in the singular

### *(Un)safe spaces*

- There were also positive experiences of space and community, for instance when accessing the scene whilst 'coming out'
- Often the 'need' or 'want' to go out on the scene was expressed in terms of comfort or safety; being able to (publicly) show physical affection was the most frequently cited example
- The scene could lose its appeal, though, as people got older or 'bored' with it, and/or developed relationships where they were less likely to go out
- Negative responses to people's 'image' on the scene were reported, with implicit 'dress codes' sometimes operating as physical barriers to accessing LGBT space via the 'policing' of door staff at scene venues
- Heterosexual people accessing scene space was sometimes identified as problematic for LGBT people
- Sometimes there was nostalgia for (less commercialised and/or more political) scenes or communities of the past
- Where people lived in areas that did not have visible LGBT space, and sometimes for those that did, specific groups often provided an opportunity to share experiences and provide each other with mutual support or 'credibility'
- Groups most often mentioned in relation to community and/or mutual support were work-based, or provided within the voluntary sector, though university-based groups were also identified
- The desire for safety and/or visible LGBT space could mean that people's 'choices' about where to live were influenced by their gender and/or sexual identities
- This included leaving hostile environments as well as moving towards particular urban areas

### *Pride events: partying with politics?*

- Pride events were identified as significant for creating/aiding community
- Such events clearly meant different things to different people, with the greatest contrast between those who saw Pride, essentially, as a 'party', and those who saw Pride more politically/as a 'protest'
- A minority believed that Prides could be both 'party' and 'protest' at the same time
- It was suggested that Prides could bring people together, combat isolation and facilitate a sense of community, thereby supporting individual (LGBT) wellbeing
- The celebratory aspect of Pride was also said to enhance self-confidence
- The importance of 'safe space' and lack of 'self-censorship' was again highlighted
- One potential disadvantage linked to Pride events was that LGBT people might become associated with "extremes" in the public eye

- There were also concerns raised about increasing commercialisation of Pride events
- Linked to this, the issue of certain groups being excluded from Pride events (such as the homeless) was also raised
- A number of participants expressed a desire for Prides to become more political (again), though this did not appeal to everyone
- The (increasing) emphasis on alcohol during Pride events was viewed as problematic by some participants

### *Online communities*

- The place of 'virtual' communities in providing (safe) space for LGBT people to meet and/or interact was also identified during the course of the research; a number of participants had met their partner this way
- Finding out information to support one's identity and/or wellbeing was also highlighted as possible through the internet
- The ability for web-based interactions to support people experiencing isolation in their physical lives was emphasised by some, most often in relation to young people and trans people
- The importance of the internet for trans communities has been raised previously by Whittle (1998), who stressed the impact that this "safe area" has had upon friendships, expertise sharing, and political activism
- A small number of people expressed concern about online activities, for example the possibility of using online networking sites to target people for hate crime

### *Wellbeing and support*

- A sense, or experience, of community was reported to be clearly linked to LGBT wellbeing, for instance in combating isolation and heightening confidence and self-esteem
- Survey respondents were asked to identify if feeling part of one or more LGBT communities had had an impact on their physical health. Results were inconclusive: 37% did not think there had been any impact, 36% felt a positive impact, 23% did not know or did not feel part of one or more communities, and 4% thought there had been a negative impact
- Survey respondents were also asked to identify if feeling part of one or more LGBT communities had had an impact on their emotional wellbeing and mental health. Results here were far clearer: 74% felt a positive impact, 16% did not know or did not feel part of one or more communities, 6% did not feel any impact, and 4% felt a negative impact
- Results were similar for the same question related to impact on 'quality of life': 72% felt a positive impact, 16% did not know or did not feel part of one or more communities, 10% did not feel any impact, and 2% felt a negative impact
- A range of participants involved in the in-depth aspects of the research emphasised the potential impact of feeling part of a community or network of LGBT people on health and wellbeing, often in relation to the benefits of developing friendships with certain people, whether through specific LGBT groups or online
- The visibility of LGBT people was felt to be important for 'validating' one's self-identity
- Some participants talked about particular friendships becoming akin to family
- LGBT communities were suggested as being particularly important whilst 'coming out' so that people could gain information or support from people who had gone through similar experiences or feelings
- Some people stressed the benefits of being 'out' for strengthening their wellbeing and/or their ability to build and maintain friendships and other relationships
- Being able to feel 'accepted', comfortable and relaxed (without self-censorship) was highlighted as important for wellbeing

### *Potential 'dangers' for wellbeing*

- A number of participants identified perceived “dangers” linked to LGBT communities that could harm individual wellbeing, such as alcohol and/or drug consumption, lack of safer sex, and pressures to conform to particular images or patterns of behaviour
- The impact of the scene was complicated, for example, by being seen to offer both affirmation and safety, at the same time as posing potential ‘risks’ to individual or collective wellbeing
- Potential exclusions on the scene or within communities were said to contribute negatively to some people’s emotional wellbeing

### **Aspirations for the future**

#### *‘Acceptance’ or ‘utopia’?*

- When thinking about aspirations for the future, participants raised themes of visibility and ‘acceptance’, for instance in relation to being able to show physical affection in public without fear or apprehension
- When some people tried to imagine a future with a more positive social context, there was often uncertainty about what that would mean for LGBT communities, i.e. do they only exist because of prejudice or discrimination? If this was no longer there, would people want or need specific LGBT communities?
- Some people felt that it was ‘unrealistic’ to think about a day when there would not be prejudice or discrimination and instead focussed on changes they would like to see now, which included more ‘inclusive’ LGBT communities

#### *Moving forward with or without legislation*

- Some participants raised issues about particular legislative change they would like to see; issues connected to ‘gay marriage’ often featured
- Not all participants saw legislation as the (only) answer, however, and raised the need for changes in broader social attitudes
- Some participants specifically raised the need for more inclusive language, for instance in talking about biphobic and transphobic as well as homophobic bullying

#### *Service provision and alternative spaces*

- Service provision and alternative spaces were issues of concern to some participants; much feedback about future spaces related to the desire for more non-scene LGBT spaces
- It was felt by some that more (non-scene) ‘community spaces’ could improve LGBT health and wellbeing; there are clear questions about how to fund and support such non-commercial venues

#### *Education and support for young people*

- When thinking about the future, some people identified the need for ‘education’, for example to eradicate stereotypes about LGBT people
- Others specifically talked about improving provision and inclusion within schools
- Participants also talked about support for young people more generally

### **Conclusions**

- In summary, the terms ‘community’ or ‘communities’ were often applied to groups of LGBT people (who may or may not know one other), whether physical, online or imagined via a shared feeling of ‘acceptance’ or ‘belonging’
- The study highlighted three key elements, or foundations, to LGBT communities: place/space, (shared) identity, and (to a lesser extent) politics (see also Homfray, 2007; Weeks, 1996)

- A social context of potential/assumed adversity was also key to perceptions of, or the desire for, community; safe spaces were identified as key to avoid 'self-censorship' regularly employed in wider society
- For many participants, communities were conceptualised in broader terms than 'just' friendship groups, most clearly in a sense of (wanting to) share space with, and feel connected to, other LGBT people with whom there may be no personal ties - a sense of solidarity beyond known relationships
- At the same time as there was a sense of solidarity, however, participants also stressed that this did not mean similarity, highlighting the varying experiences and needs within LGBT communities; this was often coupled with a strong desire to challenge existing assumptions
- A sense or experience of community had clear links to reported wellbeing, including combating isolation, heightening confidence and self-esteem, and sometimes improving/maintaining physical health
- However potential 'risks' related to elements of community were also identified (e.g. alcohol/drug consumption)
- Caution is needed when the term community is used in the singular and/or when it is assumed that LGBT people are more alike than not
- It was suggested that the concept of community poses both potential benefits in terms of affirmation and the suggestion of safety, at the same time as posing potential 'dangers' through perpetuating misconceptions and stereotypes about LGBT people
- Policy and practice that draws on the concept of community in the future should attempt to acknowledge the diversity, inequality and power dynamics embedded within LGBT communities, and within broader society - use of LGBT communities in the plural is just the start to this

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1996 Jeffrey Weeks' article 'The idea of a sexual community' was published. The paper explored the concept of 'community', suggesting that it could offer "a 'vocabulary of values' through which individuals construct their... sense of identity and belonging" (Weeks, 1996: 72). He went on to argue that those groups whose existence is 'threatened' are most likely to construct a 'community of identity'. Weeks (1996) pointed to the potential weakness of assuming similarity amongst lesbians and gay men, citing by way of example differences based on wealth, ethnicity, geography and political leanings. Yet at the same time he also identified the potential for shared experiences of stigma, prejudice, inequality and oppression, giving rise to the need for a 'community of identity'. Such a community can then support activism and individual identity through shared practices, such as Pride events, and a "sense of common purpose and solidarity represented by the term community" (Weeks, 1996: 76). According to Weeks (1996: 83), this "invented tradition" both "enables and empowers" by providing the context through which lesbian and gay lives are developed, and social orders challenged.

Some sixteen years on, applying these ideas to the (assumed) evolution of 'LGBT' (by which I mean lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans) communities (the term more often used in current policy and practice arenas), these themes of identity, belonging, diversity - and adversity - are (still) integral to the notion of communities, as explored in this report.

Whilst Weeks wrote from a sociological perspective, some years previously geographers had started to examine 'the geography of homosexuality', for instance in key works such as *Mapping desire* edited by David Bell and Gill Valentine (published in 1995). Valentine (1993b), for instance, described how traditionally the geography of homosexuality had focussed territorially, particularly in America (see also Bell and Valentine, 1995b; Brown et al, 2007). Geographical work (particularly focussing on lesbians) has also assessed the place of private homes and temporary (lesbian) spaces (Valentine, 1993b, 1995), in addition to increasing work on rural gay and lesbian geographies (e.g. see Bell and Valentine, 1995a).

Five years after Weeks' sexual community article was published, the influential book *Same sex intimacies* by Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan was released (from here on in, Weeks et al, 2001). The research on which the book was based (re)affirmed the significance of 'community', highlighting the role of friendships (and 'families of choice') in asserting and supporting a positive individual - and collective - identity. But what is this 'community', and how might it - or more accurately, they - be understood and experienced today? This question was the key aim of this study, which sought to gather existing evidence, and supplement this with new data collected from LGBT participants and 'stakeholders'. Primarily this was through an online survey and a series of in-depth interviews and group discussions.

Put simply, existing evidence suggests that community can be understood as a 'place' and/or a 'practice' (Weeks et al, 2001). These 'communities of choice' or 'communities of need' are distinguished from 'communities of fate' - the ones we are born into (Homfray, 2007; Howes, 2011). In other words, communities of 'identity' or 'interest' (Weeks et al, 2001) may be conceptualised as spatial and/or imagined. A number of writers have drawn on the work of Benedict Anderson (1983) to discuss 'imagined communities' (e.g. Bell and Valentine, 1995b; Hines, 2010; Valentine, 1995; Valentine and Skelton, 2003). In an LGBT context this may manifest via strong feelings of 'belonging' or 'connection' with other LGBT people. The concept of community can be strategically employed to suggest commonality and strength in numbers when pushing for social change. Drawing on a concept of imagined communities, however, does not rule out geographical concentration at times (Weeks et al, 2001), and does not deny that "common interests are identified, as well as simply a common label" (Homfray, 2007: 170). The imagined community often stresses a 'bond', and sense of solidarity, based on (assumed) shared experiences of stigma, prejudice or discrimination (Weeks, 1996; Weeks et al, 2001). Desired shared 'meanings' and 'vocabulary of values' (Weeks, 1996; Weeks et al, 2001) include the ability to be 'understood' without explanation, and importantly without 'self-regulation', which will be examined further in Chapter 5.

The impression of community outlined so far is invariably positive (albeit not necessarily set within a positive broader context), which can suggest a universal, egalitarian conception at odds with (some) people's lived experience (Hines, 2010; Valentine and Skelton, 2003). As Hines (2010: 606) argues, 'disparate' (trans) communities can be "cut through with power relations and often fractious political positioning". Heaphy (2012: 21) also points to the impact of diversity in emphasising how 'diminished' resources/power significantly influence the "possibilities for lesbian and gay existence... such as those associated with lower social class, disability, old age and non-urban environments" (see also Weeks, 1996; Weeks et al, 2001).

The aim of this introduction has been to give an overview of the complexity of 'community', by way of a precursor to the ensuing report which attends to much of these issues in more detail. I make no claims to be a 'community studies' expert, and deliberately draw on literature from a variety of subject disciplines, encompassing geography, health studies, history, psychology and sociology. I have also taken the conscious decision to try, where possible, to focus on literature and research emerging from within the UK, partly to accord with where this research took place, and partly to avoid the potential domination of US-based literature. Where drawing on existing literature, I have replicated the terms used, e.g. 'gay', 'lesbian and gay', LGB or LGBT.

This report provides an overview of the results of this 'scoping' study. It therefore provides a summary of the data, and many specific issues are not attended to in depth, but will be addressed in future publications. The aim here is to provide an accessible synopsis of the findings and themes which emerged during the research. There is a focus on the empirical data, though signposting to further relevant reading is provided throughout. Questions used within the study were geared towards understanding views on, and experiences of, communities currently, in the past, and in the future, but many participants also discussed their lives in a broader sense. This is important when trying to analyse people's understandings and experiences, and is therefore included within the findings. The report is organised thematically around four chapters, which broadly replicate the areas covered within data collection:

- understandings of 'community'
- community development and engagement
- experiences of 'community' and impacts for wellbeing
- aspirations for the future.

These are preceded by a summary of the research methods.

## Chapter 2: Research methods

This project consisted of two elements which ran concurrently: the first sought to bring together existing research in the field; the second sought to generate new data dealing with the subject of 'LGBT communities'. This latter element consisted of a number of components which offered potential participants a variety of ways to contribute their views and experiences. These included an online survey; an interactive website where people could contribute 'posts', comment on posts and/or upload files (documents or photographs); and in-depth interviews and discussion groups.

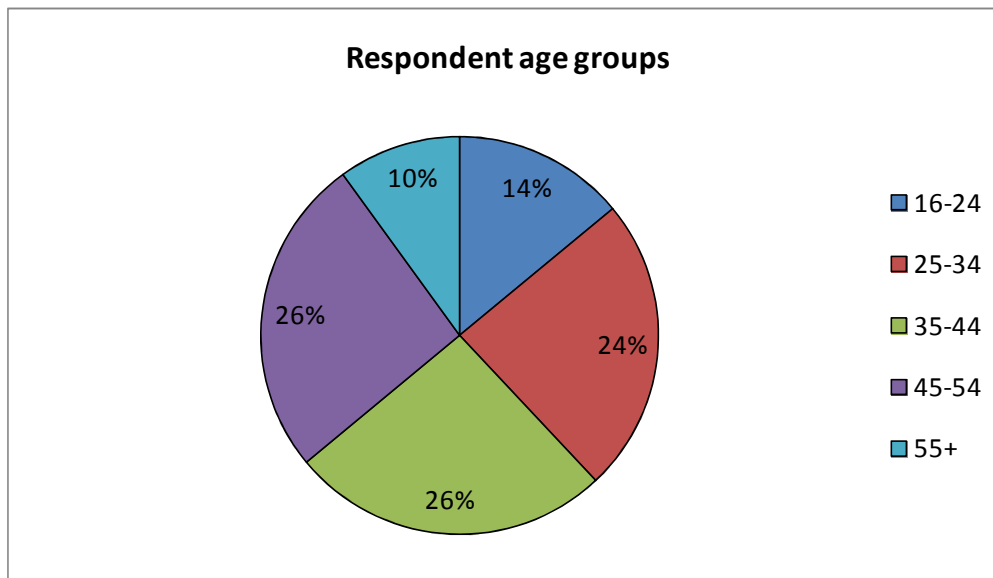
This chapter will provide an overview of these methods and the process followed throughout the study. In the early stages of the project ethical approval was gained from Sheffield Hallam University's research ethics committee. A project website was developed to provide information (and periodically updated 'news') about the project for potential participants and other interested parties. This was designed to be 'interactive' to allow external contributions (subject to moderator 'approval'). The next stage involved drafting and piloting the online survey. Once this was complete, information about the project began to be disseminated (largely electronically). This consisted of an open 'call' for assistance and/or participation. Opportunities to provide references or existing literature, complete the online survey and/or participate in regional discussion groups were explicit. This information was sent to approximately 200 individuals, groups and organisations, and also shared via a number of LGBT publications and websites. Emails explicitly requested that people forward on the information to their own contacts, which was a deliberate attempt to go beyond specific organisations or groups and into more informal networks.

### **Online survey**

The survey was designed to be short and quick to complete (there were 12 questions). The results can therefore only provide a 'snapshot' of opinion. The majority of questions were 'closed' (tick-box), though a small number of open questions allowed respondents to provide more detail. In total, there were 627 survey responses. Data from the eight closed questions will be reported in their relevant chapters. One open question invited people to provide more detail on their responses to the closed questions (107 responses), and another open question asked for more detail on respondents' identity positioning (202 responses). Extracts from this data will be presented alongside the interview/group discussion data. A full précis is not possible here but the varied responses to the latter question go some way to highlighting the complexity and diversity of experience when examining issues about identity. Detailed demographic information was not requested (as more complex statistical analysis which might have used this was not anticipated), other than how people identified their age, gender and sexuality.

Within the 627 people who responded to the survey, age ranges were relatively evenly spread between 25-54 (Chart 1), though there were fewer responses from those aged 24 and under, and those 55 and over.

Chart 1: Survey respondents' age



Unlike the age question which used pre-determined groupings, the question about gender identity was open so as not to 'force' respondents into particular categories. This produced 31 different responses (see appendix). With caution, these have been grouped into the largest categories (all those over 5 responses), which resulted in 189 female, 165 male, 13 trans and 8 genderqueer respondents. These identities do not refer to genders assigned at birth, but to current identities.

Similarly, the sexual identity question was open, which resulted in 44 different responses (see appendix). Again with caution, these have been reduced into particular groups (for all those over 5 responses). Hence, there were 176 gay (both male and female), 115 lesbian, 40 bisexual, 20 queer and 6 heterosexual/straight respondents.

### **Interviews and group discussions**

The purpose of the group discussions and individual interviews was to provide more in-depth data (from a smaller number of people) which could be analysed alongside the (less in-depth) survey results. Similar themes were explored in both methods. Open text survey and all in-depth data was analysed thematically. Discussion groups each took place over 60-90 minutes, whilst individual interviews lasted 30-120 minutes, with the majority of both lasting around 75 minutes. Group discussions involved visits to existing groups and particular locations where 'one-off' participants were directly recruited to attend the event. As with initial dissemination, this was via a wide variety of electronic advertising and distribution (e.g. to existing LGBT staff networks, known individuals, particular social groups or organisations, scene venues, online environments, etc.). More information about group make-up is contained within the appendix. The breakdown of research encounters and numbers of participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: In-depth participants

Research encounters	Number of participants
Individual interviews x 10	10
Paired interviews x 2	4
Group discussions x 5	32
<b>Total participants</b>	<b>44*</b>

\* Two participants were involved in both an individual interview and a group discussion. They have not been counted twice in the overall total.

In total, 44 people were involved in the in-depth stage of the research. Of these, 21 self-identified as female, 19 as male, and 4 did not identify with either 'female' or 'male'. Of the 44, 21 identified as



gay, 12 as lesbian, 3 as bisexual, 2 as pansexual, 1 as straight, and 5 did not disclose their sexual identity. See appendix for further information about in-depth participants.

The interview/group discussion sample was not designed to be 'representative' (and makes no claims to be such) but aimed to add 'richness' to the existing literature and survey data contained within the research. Overall, the study included representation from all four countries within the UK: England, Northern Ireland (survey only), Scotland and Wales. There was also a range of people of different ages (16-late 60s), from urban (large cities and small towns) and (to a lesser extent) more rural areas, and from diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds, though there were limited numbers of BME people involved. Whilst all participants were 'self-selecting' in the sense that they chose to complete the survey and/or be involved in more in-depth research methods, efforts were made to seek varied potential participants. This was through the diverse individuals, groups and organisations contacted directly but also via the request for information to be cascaded. However, it should be noted that along with much other research in this field the potential for certain voices to become more visible within the research is evident (Heaphy, 2012; McDermott, 2010; McManus, 2003). Another acknowledged limitation is that the specificities of Northern Irish LGBT communities were not able to be explored within this study, but recent research (Duggan, 2012) has explored the impact of religion and 'moral conservatism' on the lives of lesbians and gay men in Northern Ireland (see also O'Leary, 2009; Richardson and Monro, 2012; Schubotz and McNamee, 2009). Clearly, future larger-scale research could attend to some of the limitations highlighted above.

## Chapter 3: Understandings of 'community'

This chapter explores understandings of the concept of 'community' when applied to groups of LGBT people. It includes in-depth data, survey data, and references to existing literature in the area to examine five subthemes related to: language use; identifying communities; 'space'; 'connection', and associated 'risks' and omissions that these issues might engender.



### **Language use: acronyms, labels and meanings**

When discussing the meaning of 'LGBT community', some participants raised issues about the LGBT acronym itself. For some, this related to 'ownership':

"Frankly, we were given it [the acronym]... It's political, the minute you reduce people to an acronym you can label them, literally, and I think it serves its purpose for the system that gave it to us" (Bryn).

In the same discussion group, another participant differed in their opinion as to whether 'the system' was trying to 'label' people, or respond to people:

"I disagree that LGBT is a label that has been imposed on us. It's one that has been invented by gay people, it started saying gay which was a reaction to being called queer, and then different identities wanted to be included, women were very strong to fight for lesbian... and then other identities came on. To their credit the public bodies have latched onto that to see there is a group that they have to respond to" (Peter).

Gemma also identified how people could have agency connected to 'labels' assigned to them:

"For the majority of people in this country you get lumped into communities whether you like it or not... so the ability to construct that community for yourself is very important. Society will assign a community to you I think. They maybe won't call it that language, but they'll lump you in with some people. So being able to have agency over that I think is very important and that that community replicates something that you are happy to affiliate yourself with is very important".

Nevertheless, there were relatively widespread doubts about the meaningfulness of grouping four identities together 'as one', when this may not necessarily be desired by the groups of people it relates to:

"I am ambivalent about the lumping together of L&G with B&T and with Q whatever that means. For me T is a separate issue. The same importance, but squashing them all together just means all categories are diluted and ultimately misunderstood" (Survey respondent 75: female lesbian aged 45-54)

"'LGBT' has historically been a useful political concept but it suggests a homogeneity and communality which may not exist. It may also disguise or minimise differences within the extremely diverse groupings represented by each of the terms L, G, B and T" (Survey respondent 196: gay male aged 65+).

Whilst some participants suggested that separation of the acronym might be preferable, at least at times, others wished for less - or even no - separation:

“It’s divisive because you’re separating. Those letters each individually say ‘well those are the different parts of that community’. They’re all split and we’re giving people different names and different labels, whereas it’s about inclusiveness, ultimately, allegedly” (Charlie).

Some saw the grouping of ‘LGBT’ as beneficial:

“It’s so you’re not so alone, if you are in a group of other people like yourself... Because being trans is predominantly, you are alone” (Rachel).

In the local area that Rachel lived in, meeting with trans people was not always easy, so she found some sense of a ‘collective’ with LGB people. The degree to which LGBT people might be ‘alike’ was not something participants in this research agreed on, however. Some people were not convinced that joining ‘LGB’ and ‘T’ had been a positive step:

“I have two trans friends who hate the idea of LGBT, because they feel the whole idea has been hijacked and stuck on the end like a tail” (Bryn)

“I think that the idea of LGBT community/communities has purchase but that more work needs to be done in terms of how trans fits in and indeed whether in relation to trans, transsexual and other transgendered people have sufficiently shared objectives as to be realistically considered as a community” (Survey respondent 586: trans polysexual aged 45-54).

The representation of identities relating to both sexuality and gender was recognised as problematic by many (see also Browne and Lim, 2010; Richardson and Monro, 2012), though this did not necessarily mean they wanted to stop the use of ‘LGBT’. Rather, it was suggested that the complexities of, for instance, sexual desires and practices, and physical (gendered) bodies and/or political/personal identities could not be reconciled easily in an (understandable) acronym. Whilst some people noted the omissions within ‘LGBT’, and were happy to lengthen the acronym (for instance to include queer, questioning, or intersex), it was often recognised this came at a cost in terms of ‘usability’. For some participants the importance of identifying and therefore ‘validating’ other identity ‘options’ within any acronym was felt to be important, particularly for young people. There were varying opinions about the desirability of including ‘queer’ in the acronym, however, with recognition that this was increasingly used among some (young) people, but also still potentially offensive to others (particularly outside academia), which meant it had more limited use in practice arenas.

There were some shared concerns among participants that if the acronym became too long it could become ‘cumbersome’ or “unwieldy”. For some, the ‘reality’ of the acronym was that it is useful “shorthand”, for example for local government to use when “clumping people together” to provide services. Some people suggested that a usable acronym has facilitated visibility, thereby improving (the potential for) service provision.

Participants also raised concerns over (a potential) lack of awareness of identities not included within ‘LGBT’, such as pansexual and polysexual. For some LGBT practitioners, the current acronym identifying “four boxes” did not “sit comfortably”. It was argued that this could:

“...limit how you talk about stuff, and also how you identify” (Fiona).

Petra also suggested a need for ‘understandable narratives’ to live by, which meant particular acronyms and/or labels were important, though she hoped they would become unnecessary in the future, as broader ‘understanding’ about gender and sexuality develops. Julie similarly identified the

importance of 'understandable language', although in her case it was the term lesbian that was useful:

"I think sometimes it's a language and it's easy for people to understand because if there wasn't a word lesbian and I tried to explain to someone what I was, 'I sleep with women', I don't really want to say that. It [lesbian] is a quick word".

There were discussions about labels more broadly. This included recognition that people might call themselves different 'labels' at different times, or with different people, suggesting that we need to acknowledge that such labels are relative, or fluid. Ben suggested that labels can mean different things to different people:

"For me it is a political thing, it's a political identity as much as an emotional or physical attraction to someone of the same sex".

Some people did not like particular labels being assigned to them:

"I'm not really a fan of labels to be honest with you. I mean I'm transsexual, but I don't see myself as transsexual. I see myself as female because I see transsexual or whatever as being a label" (Louisa)

"I don't know why, but I feel much more comfortable when you say LGBT people rather than LGBT community" (Huw).

Sometimes, who does the labelling, and when, was key:

"I am personally OK with the term/phrase LGBT community and feel fine about being included in this broad spectrum of individuals. I like the word community... I do however want to be included in the wider community without being labelled" (Paula).

Participants also recognised the potential value of labels:

"If you haven't got labels you can't have groups, and you can't give grants, it cascades under a massive umbrella... I think that is a benefit of labels" (Eva).

This raises the notion of visibility and which comes 'first' when thinking about LGBT people, language use and service provision. There were clear differences of opinion whether 'labels' were necessary to identify LGBT people and/or provide services.

Some participants highlighted the importance of language, not for others' understanding, but for understanding the self. Petra, for example, identified as a gay man when she was younger because that was what was "available" then, but over time began to feel that that "wasn't the right label". Others described their reservations about how sexual identity labels could come to be seen as more than just one aspect of their identity:

"If you say 'I'm a cyclist. I belong to a group of cyclists' I imagine you perhaps after work go for a ride and perhaps at the weekend... but I don't think that it's you. And with LGBT it actually is your sexuality, but people see it as that's your life... Nobody thinks of motorists as a 100% person... it's a part of someone's life, but if you talk about gay and lesbians, then it's them" (Luce).

It was apparent that language was important to most people, whether that was a desire *not* to be 'labelled' by others, or to have the right language to construct one's *own* identity (and community). This discussion has not been able to explore the many dimensions to language use in much depth, but does at least point to the complexities hidden behind what some might interpret as a 'simple' acronym.

## **Identifying communities**

Survey respondents were asked to order a number of options in terms of how true and/or important they thought they were for perceived/experienced community/communities (Table 2).

**Table 2: Current communities**

<b>I think LGBT community/communities are about/for... (in order of importance)</b>
Source of social/other support among LGBT people
Sense of 'belonging' or 'connectedness' with other LGBT people
Coming together as part of community/political activism (e.g. for repeal of Section 28, for 'gay marriage')
Current shared experience of prejudice or discrimination
Ability to go out/meet other LGBT people on 'the scene' (e.g. pubs, bars, clubs)
Ability to go out/meet other LGBT people off 'the scene' (e.g. at a specific LGBT group)
Coming together for/at Pride events
Historic shared experience of prejudice or discrimination
Ability to meet/interact with other LGBT people online
Other (see below)

As this demonstrates, support and a sense of belonging or connectedness were the two options ranked as the most important to current communities, followed by activism and shared experiences of prejudice or discrimination. Meeting other people on the scene, off the scene, at Pride events and online were ranked less highly. This accords with some of the in-depth data discussed later. 47 additional responses to this question raised a number of other functions or strengths to LGBT communities. This included shared housing, shared sexual encounters, source of education, information or guidance, and enabling research. Raising visibility was also raised:

"Providing a space from which being the Other is turned on its head" (Survey respondent 10: female post-heterosexual aged 35-44)

"Visibility of LGBT 'difference' for my children" (Survey respondent 246: female lesbian aged 35-44).

Participants involved in in-depth methods were asked what they felt 'community' meant when applied to LGBT people. Some participants were sceptical about the concept. Some began by identifying that the word generally has become more widely used:

"As politicians and public bodies... became aware of LGBT people with needs and interests they had to find some way of referring to it and so it's become communities, it's seen as an interest or needs group [but] it's part of a wider thing" (Peter).

Others suggested that there would never be agreement about its meaning:

"The idea of community is just a word, it does not stand up on its own... my experience is the more you come together the more you find that everyone has different ideas about what the word community means and it is impossible to please everybody" (Bryn).

Some practitioners said they consciously avoided using it within their work:

"I do sometimes try and avoid the word community because I think it's over-used when people just mean a group of people... I think it's too easy to label a group of people as a community" (Matt).

Ascribing belonging to 'community' was a recurring theme, with some people disinclined to see themselves as part of an LGBT community, if they believed such a thing exists:

"I'm always very hesitant about the community thing... I'm me and not because of my sexuality or my partner or whatever and that's why I would actually stand back from that terminology because I don't want people from outside that community, if you will, to say 'so that means you're part of that', and that means you're this, that or the other" (Luce)

"I feel very uncomfortable with the use of "community" / "communities" generally as they imply a commonality and familiarity which I don't think exists. I have multiple identities as an individual and feel that talking about people in this context sometimes broaches on the absurd - and find anyone who uses this language dubious and with doubtful intention towards treating me as who I am - an individual rather than a generic / stereotypical "type"" (Survey respondent 445: gay male aged 25-34).

One person suggested that when thinking about provision for LGBT people, 'target group' was a more accurate description than 'community'. Another suggested that 'constituency' was more accurate because community did not capture the diversity within communities. Others argued that the term could have negative consequences:

"Many years of political campaigning in non-LGBT related arenas has made me regard the idea of "communities" whether based on gender, religion, ethnicity or something else, with great suspicion. In my experience they serve to entrench differences and promote hostility between the ins and the outs" (Survey respondent 194: "mostly" female bisexual aged 45-54)

"Through my work as a trainer around LGBT awareness, I think the idea of community tends to bring problems - people assume we're all the same!!" (Survey respondent 65: gay male aged 55-64).

Jason suggested that it was "homophobic heterosexual people" who used the term LGBT community, when he felt that there was no evidence that LGBT people necessarily "live in harmony", so therefore there was no such 'community', a view supported by others in the same discussion group. There was some agreement within the research that the word community could lead (consciously or not) to 'othering', where people are made to seem separate and/or different from other people:

"I think for me there's a danger... we're creating groups and we're creating other... My concern is that especially with policy makers or people who are funding things that they create boundaries and by creating an LGBT community you're going to have a group of people who won't like that" (Jackie)

"I think from a society point of view a community's over there... it's for some people also safe because it means not me, 'don't confuse me with them, that's their community'. And I think that's used by people and I see that... 'not my neighbours please, I don't want them next to me. Them, they can stay in their own community please'. So I think it's misused" (Luce).

Not everyone saw the concept of community negatively, however. Whilst many described positive experiences (which will be discussed later) of their own, personal community, it was often the concept of a universal 'LGBT community' that met with cynicism, or sometimes anger. Use of the term more generally could still be seen as beneficial, particularly when pushing for legislative or social change:

"The positive connotation of the word community for me suggests... mass, it's a mass of people and I think, you know, when we talk about the LGBT community it suggests there's a lot of us and therefore our needs cannot be ignored... whether it be for the government in terms of voting, or marketing... there's some credibility to that mass" (Timothy).

This project itself referred to LGBT communities in the plural, but it was often then discussed by participants in the singular, as above. However, a common suggestion was that the term should be

used in its plural, to recognise the diversity within and between LGBT communities (see also Homfray, 2007; Howes, 2011):

"I think there's plural. I definitely don't think there's one LGBT community and I think when I was a lot younger I probably would have got the idea that there was more of one, but as I got older perhaps and perhaps more politically involved in LGBT things as well and I guess just in myself kind of developed a more nuanced understanding of the world and there's different groups of people, then perhaps I kind of came to realise that there was multiple communities and you kind of drift in and out, and some I think are very visual and some I think are very kind of much more quiet and undertone, but they still exist" (Helen)

"LGBT 'communities' are exactly that - a plural. There isn't really one community but many different parts of it. You can feel part of some at different times, or perhaps never part of some of them" (Survey respondent 293: gay male aged 35-44).

Some participants highlighted diversity within LGBT communities, for example regarding age, ethnicity, gender or social class. This issue has been emphasised in the growth of academic literature discussing 'intersectionality' (e.g. see Richardson and Monro, 2012; Rogers, 2012; Taylor, 2007), which some participants demonstrated awareness of. Sometimes plurality was identified specifically in relation to the components of 'LGBT', in that there were separate communities:

"I think the trans aspect to it, when I have spoken to friends that are trans and people who have come on training that I have done and said quite clearly that the trans community needs to exist separately because the issues are separate to sexuality... certainly in [area] the adult trans community are very lively and vibrant... The lesbian community in [area] again is quite strong but keeps itself quite separate from the rest of the community" (Liz)

"If there isn't an LGBT community, though, is there an L community, a G community, a T community and a B community?" (Dilys)

"It's a bit like saying all football players are part of a community, but there are ones who support this team and that team and you wouldn't necessarily put them together" (Jodi).

For some, acknowledging diversity and plurality was identified as important in professional practice:

"It's very easy to try to encompass everyone under an umbrella. That would be very handy often, it would be very nice, it would be very idealistic, but unfortunately it doesn't work like that and also fortunately it doesn't work like that because although we serve, from an organisational perspective, what we call the LGBT community, I think there is a danger in assuming that you know what that community is or what that community wants" (Gemma).

Some trans participants, in particular, felt that the (singular) word community did not acknowledge the diversity of identities included within the 'trans' umbrella. Others also acknowledged that people can belong to more than one (identity-based) community at the same time:

"You can be gay and you can be Jewish and you can be old and you can be all these things, but you're not necessarily one. You can belong to more than one community in the same way... I think I tick all the boxes really, almost" (Steve).

The idea that LGBT communities could include heterosexual 'allies', who may for instance work in the field, or support 'the cause', was also raised:

"I strongly believe that these safe spaces and communities should involve heterosexual allies - I have many in my life, and my life is much richer for them" (Survey respondent 380: gay cisgendered male aged 25-34)

“I think the term gay community actually stops one interacting outside of that and when you start saying gay community it keeps people out... By saying it would be like a community you exclude people and it feels like there’s another barrier... I think it was Joan Baez, was it not, who went on civil rights and she was like not connected and that was like a huge step and I think that’s what we need” (Steve).

Several survey respondents also felt ‘the LGBT community’ had been welcoming, in contrast to some of their other experiences:

“I am asexual, so don’t fit immediately into LGBT but have many friends in the community and have been very much accepted. Unlike the asexual community which is mostly online and very divisive about what the actual definition of ‘asexual’ is and seem to be very much against ‘sexual’ people of any type. They seem to be very insular, whereas LGBT is much more embracing and welcoming in my experience” (Survey respondent 410: asexual female aged 35-44).

For some participants, recognising diversity within and between LGBT communities did not necessarily take away from the usefulness of the term, if used with some caution or awareness:

“[I] don’t think it means dispense with everything, [there’s] no harm in meeting with common identities and experiences as long as identity is recognised as only a part” (Petra).

The political strength in ‘coming together’ or ‘staying together’ was often stressed, for example Ruth suggested that “we march under banners at Pride with people you wouldn’t speak to the rest of the year”.

Overall, some participants were reticent to identify as part of a community, whilst others perceived advantages in doing so. Within this, who was attributing community status to whom was considered significant. There was also clear acknowledgment of diversities and pluralities for many participants, partly depending on what they understood community to be, as explored below.

### **Community as ‘space’**

Respondents to the survey were asked to identify the type of community, or communities, they felt part of (with responses not mutually exclusive).

Table 3: Types of community

<b>The LGBT community/communities I feel part of tend to be...</b>	<b>% of responses</b>
Physical and near where I live	53
Virtual/online	48
A feeling	48
Physical but not near where I live	34
Physical and based where I work	24
I don’t feel part of LGBT community/communities	11
Other (see below)	3

Table 3 suggests the importance of physical, online and ‘felt’ (which could be expressed as imagined) communities. 28 additional responses provided other examples of the ‘basis’ of their community, including university, politics or activism, and volunteering:

“Based on all of the above: I feel it at work, with LGBT colleagues, friends from across the world, driven by my interests i.e. lesbian football team, lesbian camping, LGBT film festival etc.” (Survey respondent 475: gay/lesbian female aged 25-34)

“A historical connection, based on feminist second wave and lesbian feminist movement. Reading, culture, ongoing friends...” (Survey respondent 481: female lesbian aged 55-64).



When most people involved in interviews and group discussions began talking about community they often, at least initially, discussed community in terms of physical space, or 'visual communities'. This is probably not surprising given the long history of community being understood in geographical terms (Homfray, 2007; Walkerdine and Studdert, 2011). It is only more recently that people have proposed 'communities of identity' (Weeks, 1996) or 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983). For LGBT people, community as physical space most often refers to 'the scene'. In this study, 'the scene' was most often used to describe commercial 'gay bars' and 'clubs' (notably not 'LGBT' bars and clubs). Interestingly, there was not always agreement about whether it was the customers or owners that made a venue 'gay' (see also Homfray, 2007).

"I think there's kind of the scene which tends to be very Caucasian and younger and more male dominated and I'd describe that as quite a visual, what people think of as the LGBT community" (Helen)

"In terms of the scene I think there will always be like a kind of core membership, like a kind of scene queen. I mean that's definitely a community. If you go to [pub] there's always the same core 20 people in there, and if you go to [club] there's always the same core 100 people there. I mean I'm one of them" (Matt)

A minority of participants also mentioned saunas and/or gay book shops and coffee houses, whilst Gerry thought of the scene as a "broader gay network", and not just a "hedonistic" element. It has been argued that UK bisexual communities are less likely to be "found in commercial scenes in the way that lesbian/gay communities often are", but identified through networks of groups, events, online spaces and via a national magazine *Bi Community News* (Barker et al, 2012: 17). Some survey respondents concurred with this:

"My life changed radically for the better once I discovered and attended BiCon and found other bisexuals to interact with online and in person. It was the first time my identity was validated and I was over 40 at the time I discovered it... I still love to meet up with bi friends every year at BiCon and can easily interact with bi people online" (Survey respondent 511: "bisexual, polyamorous, submissive" female aged 55-64).

Others stressed different communities:

"In realising that I was bisexual I found a desire to connect with others to be able to talk about what this decision would mean for me and my future relationships. It has led to a completely new community with whom I share my life. This has been within my workplace and through LGBT professional groups" (Survey respondent 132: bisexual female aged 45-54).

The comfort and/or safety that spaces could bring were clearly important to notions of community:

"Specific streets here are communities where LGBT people are comfortable, confident... it doesn't matter which category they belong" (Eva)

"You need a safe space. If you go down the local pub and sit there holding your girlfriend's hand and kissing her you aren't going to stay there for very long... you need to know that you can be safe there" (Dilys).

Some areas, in particular, have almost legendary status as enviable communities, which may of course not be the 'reality' for those living there.

"You see, when I go to places like Brighton I actually feel there's a good LGBT community... The reason I say Brighton is I think it's got a really nice vibe about the fact that it's not just centred around the bars... people are just walking in and out of the shops and it's obvious that they're in a same sex relationship, but they're just enjoying life, you know, they're sitting in the park, they're going to the beach, and that for me is a real sense of community" (Timothy)

Weeks et al (2001) also documented that for those who live in particular areas a sense of 'real' 'lesbian and gay community' can be felt geographically. In the present study, the cause of discomfort in other areas of the UK was said to be anxiety in relation to "second-guessing" how people might respond to their (visible) identities:

"Places like Brighton, or you go to San Francisco, you feel as though you can walk down the street holding whoever's hand you want to hold because there's other people doing it and you can identify with those people... I don't have to think 'oh, I can't say that'... (Jackie)

"Yeah, or 'what will they think?' or 'how will they interpret it?' or 'how do we have to package it to make it a bit palatable?' or something like that" (Luce).

Dissatisfaction with a broader social context was often the reason that people chose to socialise 'on the scene', although not everyone was satisfied with the scene either. Some participants criticised venues targeted at LGBT people (see also Taylor, 2008):

"A lot of the places are based solely around a few who own clubs, you know, where the toilet seats are broken and it's like there is no, you know, I don't know of any other group that kind of subjects itself to that... we have three really bad bars with broken toilet seats... under any other circumstance anyone who had any sense of self-belief would not go in these places and put up with sticky floors and everything else" (Jodi).

Others aired concerns about the extent to which LGBT communities were separated from other people when they were confined to particular geographical spaces:

"There's a push and pull as well between wanting sanctuary and wanting to huddle together in the LGBT community, 'right, we shall stay and we'll be safe here', and needing to integrate and educate" (Charlie).

As certain 'LGBT areas' were often concentrated in specific urban locations this also meant that not everyone had access to, or experience of, these spaces:

"To be honest, in [town], for example, we don't have much of a community in terms of places. You see, we don't have any gay venues really. We have one LGBT night, that to be fair, is only for the scene people to be quite honest with you. So all of us guys kind of get left off the side because we don't like all that type of environment" (Julie).

Some participants talked about feeling excluded from commercial scenes, whether on the basis of financial resources or personal dress styles, for example. These issues will be returned to in Chapter 5, but are important in considering people's understandings of community. One participant, for instance, rejected the word community, preferring instead the term 'clique' to describe a scene he had experience of:

"...all the same people, they all know each other, they all sleep with each other... especially gay men... not to stereotype it or anything... and they all look the same, dress the same, everything" (Ed).

He suggested that in larger urban areas 'community' might be more than 'just' the scene, which meant that both 'community' and 'scene' were more easy to identify, but that in smaller cities 'LGBT space' was focussed solely on the scene (see also Ellis, 2007a; Flowers and Hart, 1999; Valentine, 1995; Valentine and Skelton, 2003 for discussion of perceived 'cliques' on the scene/within communities). The notion of LGBT communities was seen as particularly problematic for young people who could not (yet) legally enter/engage in the scene:

“[Name] is a gay bar but it's only older people who can go. They should do like a younger gay night for people who are younger who want to go... a gay pop and crisps night”<sup>1</sup> (Jason).

Other participants in this discussion group said they preferred to think of community as being their “circle of friends”, precisely because the scene might not be accessible or appealing to them. Again, this definition was not always easily applied to some young people who found it hard(er) to meet other young LGBT people in the area. Jason, in particular, said that that was the reason to attend specific LGBT groups or events, for him to try ‘cast his net wider’ and meet more people ‘willing’ to be ‘out’. He saw this as his only option when accessing the scene was not possible because of his age. Other research has documented the importance of particular social/support groups when access to the scene is restricted or undesirable and/or more informal friendship networks unavailable (Formby and Willis, 2011; Hines, 2010; Valentine and Skelton, 2003). Simpson (2012a) also identified middle-aged gay men’s use of social groups, and domestic homes, within a (developing) pattern of socialising away from issues they associated with the scene, such as ageism and/or alcohol(ism).

Another participant suggested that ‘visual community’, as contained within the scene, only represented certain ‘types’ of LGBT people:

“I think it’s so easy to assume that an LGBT community revolves around gay bars, which I think [city] is therefore in a plus position compared to Manchester because people assume that Canal Street is the nucleus of their community... the people who go out on the scene are almost always white, young, rich gay men, which is only a smidgen of LGB and T” (Matt).

It should be noted that the concept of LGBT space is complicated by the fact that it should not necessarily be seen as solely this; for instance existing academic literature has identified heterosexual consumption of scene spaces (see Browne and Bakshi, 2011 for further discussion). Whilst some participants in this study saw this ‘invasion’ as problematic (see Chapter 5), Browne and Bakshi (2011: 186) have argued that “space can be both straight and gay simultaneously”, also contesting assumptions that LGBT people can never be ‘comfortable’ in ‘straight’ venues (see also Browne, 2008). Their work points to the specificities of context when examining LGBT experiences, so that ‘straight’ spaces may be experienced as ‘safe’ in Brighton and Hove, where their research took place, but this may not necessarily be the case elsewhere in the UK, as this report will go on to address. Valentine (1993a: 112) previously stressed that lesbians may be more likely to make use of temporary spaces (e.g. ‘lesbian nights’) because “lack of finance in the lesbian community means women-only venues are frequently small spaces in multi-use buildings, located in marginal urban areas”. However this is not to say that there are no areas of lesbian concentration in the UK, operating as ‘invisible lesbian ghettos’ (Valentine, 1995).

Where community was understood as space, this was not always focussed on the commercial scene. Some, for example, emphasised particular events, groups or organisations instead:

“The idea of a community/ies sounds appealing - a place to have a home. It is hard to feel the community - it feels nebulous at times and yet when one goes to events which are designed for LGBT like Pride or the recent gay fringe festival in East London, the community is visible and this feels reaffirming” (Website contribution)

“It [this group] is a place of support and I suppose acceptance really... where you can be yourself without the constraints of society... society hasn’t accepted, fully like, well certainly not people like myself... I think we are kind of a community because of that” (Louisa)

“LGB communities where they exist do tend to focus on institutions, on organisations, because I know if you go to Canal Street, LGB community as a single entity doesn’t really exist [but] I’m thinking of the Manchester gay choir which forms a nucleus where you get an LGBT community worthy of the name, but outside of those institutions I guess it’s slightly looser” (Paul).

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<sup>1</sup> A ‘pop and crisps night’ refers to a designated underage club night.

A number criticised the notion of 'scene as community':

"I live in Manchester where there are a range of accessible LGBT focussed services / businesses / bars clubs etc however I don't feel that this necessarily constitutes a community" (Survey respondent 95: female lesbian aged 35-44)

"I've only just brushed up against the kind of scene, not necessarily in [town], in London briefly, but I never really participated or looked much further into it. It scared me too much so I backed away... that to me seems like a very sort of superficial community. Communities that mean more in the sense of LGBT community... seem to be networks of friends, networks of people who genuinely get to know you" (Charlie).

Keogh et al (2004: 29), based on their research with ethnic minority gay men, argued that "the sexualisation of the scene was seen to override any possibility of the development of community and therefore it was seen not as a place to make friends or find support" (see also Cant, 2008). These themes will be returned to in Chapter 5.

To summarise, one understanding of community clearly includes 'space', whether this be a geographical area, such as Brighton, commercial scenes, or specific LGBT groups or events. Experiences of such spaces varied, which will be explored further in subsequent chapters.

### **Community as 'feeling' or 'connection'**

Another key way in which community was conceptualised was as a 'feeling'. This was often far less easy to articulate than discussions of the scene or other spaces, but was identified as important by many participants:

"I think the most important is like the feeling of it... I feel though it's not a community, it's like a culture and that's what I think we should swap the word community for because I feel as though like a culture is something that's progressed over years and years and we have, haven't we? ...I think when you've been oppressed for that long it is a culture. So it's a feeling for me" (Julie).

This 'feeling' was often described as a sense of 'belonging', 'acceptance' or shared experience:

"The concept of belonging to something, however kind of intangible that is as a concept, the feeling that you belong to something is part of your identity. And for me, you know, coming out, I wanted to find out what it meant to be LGBT, I wanted to learn about what people were like, what that would mean that I would be like" (Gemma)

"There's also kind of a shared experience element to it as well because, you know, I'm sure most of us have in some way, I expect, experienced some sort of negativity to homosexuality and we have maybe slightly in some way a shared background which we all relate to" (Adam).

This sense of belonging has been documented previously (Valentine, 1994, 1995; Weeks et al, 2001).

One participant provided an example of how when visiting Auschwitz he had felt a sense of empathy or commonality with other gay people from the past, which at the time he had not been able to tell anyone:

"This is a bit of a dark story, but several years ago when I was at school I went on a trip to Auschwitz and I'm also Jewish as well so I felt, because everyone knew I was Jewish, but no-one knew I was gay, and I felt so hurt by the fact that it would have been me who was dragged into that gas chamber, not because, well because I was Jewish, yes, but because I was gay. Like that really hit me and I couldn't tell anyone about it" (Matt).

Huw also articulated how he felt having sexuality in common contributed to feeling 'comfortable' with other people:

"I've got a lodger and he's gay and like I made it clear in the advert that I was gay and I didn't say I wanted someone who was gay living there, but it just so happened that he came round... we're both pretty quiet guys and we give each other space... it's not one thing, but I suppose that is obviously a factor. Maybe there are a lot of things that are understood without being spoken about with that and I suppose I do feel more comfortable just being with him knowing that he's gay".

Participants also talked of 'gravitating' towards other gay people, such as at a party. A sense of 'connection' between 'non-heterosexual' people was also identified by Weeks et al (2001: 28), and linked to a unifying "institutionalised hostility towards homosexuality". A sense of sharing something 'in common' was identified by many participants:

"I'm a [football team] supporter, so if I went to a pub and I saw other [football team] supporters I would associate with those and I would talk with those and I would feel more comfortable in that environment. So I think it's that kind of similarity that you can actually feel part of something if there is something that you've got in common with other people" (Colin)

"I think what's shared is... most people continuously have to come out. Most people have experienced prejudice in their day to day lives and that prejudice can vary, but there is a shared sense of prejudice there" (Helen).

Feeling less "conscious" or anxious about other people was given as a reason for feeling more "relaxed" with LGBT people (see also Valentine, 1993c, 1994; Weeks et al, 2001). Whilst Jason was sceptical that he would necessarily have much 'in common' with other "gays" he shared his concerns for other LGBT people facing "shit".

Often making explicit what factors LGBT people had 'in common', other than 'coming out' and/or shared experiences of hostility or discrimination, or the fear of that, seemed difficult, but some participants did suggest examples, with vegetarianism (or "lesbian food") being raised more than once. This could point to (greater likelihood of) potential shared concerns and/or a 'vocabulary of values' (Weeks, 1996; Weeks et al, 2001) beyond homosexuality:

"I think what also brings together some kind of community is kind of those rather ridiculous but non-dangerous stereotypes, so like the fact that loads of my gay and lesbian friends are vegetarian... a kind of shared outlook on life whether it's serious political things or it's the fact that you love tofu!" (Matt).

Not everyone was convinced that LGBT people have particular interests or opinions 'in common', however. Some participants implied or suggested that maybe it was the case that only some LGBT people will be "like-minded", meaning that in effect there are "communities within communities":

"I think you have to be careful with equating like-mindedness with, like, sexuality, behaviour or identity; it's not the same thing" (Bryn)

"I have little in common with either lesbians or transsexuals, most of my mates tend to be either straight men and women or other gay men" (Survey respondent 96: male "gay/faggot" aged 35-44)

"I don't see myself as belonging to the same community as people who go along to the mainstream gay clubs... for me in that sense community really, I hope, is something about politics and it's about shared values. But as a service provider I'm not actually speaking to people with shared values, I'm speaking to people who need to access services. So they're two very different things" (Gemma).

However, whilst Gemma recognised she may not have shared values with the 'service users' she worked with, she did feel that the staff at her organisation had more 'in common':

"I think that even people who work here who don't identify as LGBT, I think they might see themselves as part of the LGBT community in terms of service providers or practitioners and that sense of belonging... What we all share here, I think, is a commitment to overcoming discriminations, whether they be from a legislative perspective or whether they be from an everyday perspective, in a school or whether, they're cultural... there is a shared understanding that that is what we're here to do" (Gemma).

Some participants raised the importance of friendship groups or networks, which might 'interlock' in certain areas, or even across the country:

"Little lesbian groups are knitted across England" (Ruth)

"I think for me I probably link community with your social hubs... I don't think you exclusively necessarily belong to one. If you're involved in political campaigning you tend to quickly realise that you do three campaigns and there's a massive overlap of people" (Helen).

As Helen suggested, friendships might be formed through shared political activities, whilst for others bonds were forged through LGBT service provision, or made easier by living in areas known for their LGBT population density.

"I come here [to a support group] because of acceptance. I mean all my family don't want to know me. I've lost all family completely because of who I am... Maybe I enjoy sort of interaction with lesbian, bi, or whatever, because I feel that they... accept and they do understand where like I'm coming from type of thing, whereas like straight people they don't want to know" (Louisa)

The importance of supportive friendships when family relationships may have been weakened, or lost altogether, after coming out, was also highlighted by Weeks et al (2001).

Some participants commented that whilst initial connections might be formed through shared gender and/or sexual identities, they would then "pick and choose" their (closer) friends from within this social circle. For Petra, what was important, at least at first, was a "mutually understandable language" and "not having to explain myself" (see also Ellis, 2007a; Knocker, 2010). Petra joined a gay cycling club where she felt comfortable, because whilst they might not have been quite the 'same', they were "similar enough". Other participants wanted some LGBT friends so that they could share or discuss issues connected with their identity:

"Well I'm going to be brutally honest. The reason why I enjoy lesbians' company, gay men's company, trans individuals' company, I really enjoy it, because I've got straight friends and I love them all to bits, but I still don't sit there and talk about my relationship or my sex life with them. I can't because they've grown up in a society where that's not normal" (Julie)

"There are some people who question the very idea of a network, like an LGBT community, that straight people say 'well why do you need that? If you think that you're not any different from us, then why do you need that?', but it seems to me that they don't quite get that straight people don't need that because they've got no obstacle. They are the norm in society. They are given all of these templates to live and we have none. We have to find our own. We have to find people like us or at least people who are enough like us in that one way that we can connect with them in other ways" (Charlie).

Interestingly, for two participants their relationship with LGBT communities, or individuals, had not always been easy. They had both tried to "disassociate" themselves from other LGBT people, until they were fully 'comfortable' with their own identities. Gerry, in particular, said that visible LGBT

communities, such as those present at Pride events, “never spoke to me... they never called me... Men in underpants didn’t say anything to me”. He linked this to wanting to fit in, “in a heteronormative environment”, particularly as a young Asian man: “male heterosexuality as a role model was attractive, [it] did appeal”. Both of these men had gone on a journey from feeling some disgust at photographs of Pride events, for example, to having attended their first (local) Pride in 2011 and going on to attend World Pride in 2012. Shourjo commented that it now “made sense” to him to be part of a community, so that LGBT people could support each other.

Carl also talked about a stage in life that he referred to as “gay limbo”, when he came to realise he did not “fit in” in “straight society” but was not yet ‘out’, or did not feel part of a ‘gay community’ either:

“People that are straight to their friends but gay to themselves... it just isn’t a demographic that you can ever try and reach really”.

On the whole, feelings of ‘connection’ with other LGBT people were often hard to explain, but were nevertheless felt by participants. This was often related to broader social context, such as a lack of ‘acceptance’.

### **Risks and omissions**

Not everyone is accepted or feels they ‘belong’ within LGBT communities, however, which caused some people to question the usefulness of such a concept of ‘community’. Discussions about communities raised concerns about the risks or omissions often present in language - and service provision - that is premised on the concept of ‘community’:

“I think there is a risk, some people can use these terms to say we have dealt with this issue... It’s problematic... I think the idea of LGBT community can really limit the services that are delivered or accessed or the way that information is disseminated. People will say they have consulted with the LGBT community when they have only consulted with a small aspect of that... it could mean they actually consulted with the LG part of that and not the B and the T” (Andrea).

Gemma suggested that the ‘risk’ could be from within LGBT communities, which service provision could address:

“I think that by presenting a homogenous concept of a community that’s very dangerous... I think a lot of young people have to go through a process where they are sold a lot of stuff that they are supposed to do, and be, and act like, and young women and young men face these kind of pressures to conform... So with that label of community comes a danger that, yes, you are presenting a true way of doing something... I hope that in our practice here we’re careful to present options to young people that they can participate in their community in the way that they want to, that they don’t have to change themselves to fit into a community, which I think a lot of LGBT people do feel that”.

A number of people identified particular groups or individuals as less visible, or provided for, within the ‘LGBT community’ umbrella:

“The voice can be dominated by those who have the resources to promote themselves. As a practitioner trying to engage with the LGBT community... you can find that sometimes you have to engage with social groups that exist but you are aware that they are often not the ones that need the help the most... it’s always a battle and you have to be asking the question of who is being excluded in different situations” (Andrea)

“I think that’s a problem that we see quite a lot... that the T is sidelined or marginalised, that actually things that claim to be LGBT are really L and G and that’s historically been the case” (Gemma).

Awareness of the potential for services to exclude 'B' or 'T' within LGBT was relatively widespread. There was also evidence of exclusion from within particular groups (see also Weeks et al, 2001):

"I've just come back from London and obviously there's a really strong trans community and gay community there... It's very accepting... There is community [where I live], but not necessarily accepting of me... actually a lot of lesbian girls are really not accepting of trans women" (Paula)

"One of the things that we're kind of focusing on at the moment is kind of double or triple discrimination because you may have LGBT [trade union] members who are disabled and they're kind of ostracised from the LGBT community because they've got a disability and they're ostracised from the disability community because they're LGB or T... you can get this multiple discrimination where people are kind of pushed out and they don't feel as though they belong anywhere" (Colin).

Overall, understandings of communities, and the inclusions and exclusions within them, can be linked to people's motivation for engaging with communities (or not), and the importance they place on historical developments. These issues will be addressed in the following chapter.



## Chapter 4: Community development and engagement

This chapter examines how or why communities may have developed, and the reasons people choose to engage in/with them. Drawing on in-depth and survey data, as well as previous literature in the field, it looks at three key areas: socialising and 'connection'; broader social contexts, and political activism.



Survey respondents were asked to order a number of options in terms of how important they thought they were in contributing to community development (Table 4).

Table 4: Community development

<b>I think LGBT community/communities exist or have developed because of... (in order of importance)</b>
Need for social/other support among LGBT people
Desire to meet/interact with other LGBT people (physically or online)
Shared experience of prejudice or discrimination (whether historic or current)
Historical developments in 'gay rights' or 'gay liberation' political activism
Sense of 'belonging' or 'connectedness' with other LGBT people
More recent/current community/political activism (e.g. for repeal of Section 28, for 'gay marriage')
Growth of commercial 'gay scene'
Coming together as a response to the emergence of HIV/AIDS
Development and rise in Pride events
Decriminalisation of sex between men (in England and Wales) in the 1960s
Increased visibility of LGBT people (e.g. in the media)
Other (see below)

Table 4 and Table 2 (Chapter 3) point to how important social/support needs and LGBT interactions are perceived to be for communities both currently and historically. Shared experiences of prejudice or discrimination were similarly important both now and in the past. Gains in 'gay rights' were also seen to contribute to the development of LGBT communities. A sense of belonging or connection was attributed less to historical developments than it was to current communities. Recent political activism, growth of the scene, HIV/AIDS, Prides, decriminalisation and visibility were seen as less important in contributing to community development. 34 respondents provided additional comments, including:

"Development more rapid in recent years due to technological advances - Internet access, increase in financially viable access to equipment (computers/laptops/3g phones)" (Survey respondent 34: female aged 45-54, does not "self identify sexually, but others would call me a lesbian")

"Criminalisation created a commercial as well as an informal subculture for men who had sex with men which helped participants in the subculture begin to identity what they had in common and thus begin to create an identity as homosexual/gay/queer" (Survey respondent 578: female lesbian aged 55-64)

"Because people always want to be part of groups - if it wasn't LGBT it would be something else" (Survey respondent 166: pansexual/gay (trans) man aged 18-24).

## **Socialising and 'connection'**

An important factor that people identified in relation to the development of, or engagement with, LGBT communities was the ability or opportunity to socialise or interact with other LGBT people. This links with the notion of sharing something 'in common' identified in the previous chapter. Many participants had wanted to meet 'like-minded' people at some point in their lives. In general, this was thought to aid an initial 'connection' and/or ongoing mutual support:

"Obviously it's easier to talk to another gay person who understands the same issues you may have... there is a want to associate with your own kind" (Dilys)

"Whether it be speaking to people online, whether it be meeting them face to face, whether it be in a venue... it's about interacting with other people and sharing experiences and... feeling part of something... It can manifest itself in various different ways, but it's the connection between people and sharing something in common" (Colin).

For some, communities had not facilitated friendships because communities *were* friendships, and not always restricted to LGBT friendships:

"I do not define my 'community' as LGBT. I have a close network of friends in 'my' community, it makes no difference if they are gay or straight!" (Survey respondent 322: gay female aged 25-34).

Initial connections were also facilitated through organised groups or networks:

"I threw myself in [to the LGBT committee] as a student because it was something I desperately wanted to do... if there wasn't a society or a committee to facilitate stuff, then there wouldn't be a community" (Matt)

"Sense of community can come from joining organised groups. These were generally started by committed individuals working together" (Peter).

Hines (2007) has highlighted the role of trans support groups in enabling information sharing and mutual support, especially at times of transition, and particularly in a context where appropriate/desired care may be lacking in broader medical, social and welfare provision. Socialising and connection also had implications for individual wellbeing, with some participants engaged with LGBT communities and/or other LGBT people in order to develop "self-acceptance, self-understanding... to progress [and] develop".

Being able to meet and/or socialise with other LGBT people was identified as particularly important when people were making a 'new start'. This could be relocating to a new geographical area, or related to more personal circumstances, such as a relationship ending:

"Suppose you moved into [city] for the first time, as a gay person, the most likeliest places that you would aim for are the gay clubs initially to start making contacts and get to know people" (Dilys)

"Recently when I moved to [city] I wanted to just kind of socialise more with people like I'd met in [other city]... so I ended up joining various sort of odd little societies and things... there was again a desire to find people... searching kind of for the familiar I guess... I think it's those points where you're... coming out, or if it falls apart, so you split up with your long-term partner or that social group falls apart or you move and suddenly you're like 'right, I'm single, I'm lonely'" (Helen).

The scene was also identified as important when moving countries:

“Moving to the UK and being able to find a community allowed me to change cultures with some ease. For out individuals the LGBT community can be a source of support and belonging that is accessible in most Western nations” (Survey respondent 311: gay male aged 35-44).

Ellis (2007a: 119) also highlighted the role of community during times of changing circumstances and/or “crisis” (see also Browne and Bakshi, 2011; Valentine, 1995).

The role of the scene (conceptualised by some as a form of LGBT community) when looking for sex and/or partners was identified by a number of participants, although less evident in this study than some others, such as Aggleton et al, 1995, 1999; Davies et al, 1993.

“I don’t think we should underestimate sexual desire. I used to go to pubs to pick somebody up, unless things have changed a lot” (Peter)

“I wanted to pull as well, and there is that in there, and you can’t pretend it’s not” (Helen)

Laura tried to engage with LGBT communities when looking for “the right person”, but for her this was definitely not through going out on the scene.

Participants felt that when LGBT people engage with particular communities, such as specific groups or scenes, it allows them to (more) easily meet and/or socialise with other LGBT people. This was identified as important both now and in the past. The emergence of ‘communities’, which has enabled friendships and sexual relationships, was for some, intimately linked to LGBT people being unable to interact comfortably in broader communities. Seeking safety, therefore, was identified as key to developments within LGBT communities.

### **Avoiding broader social contexts; creating new communities**

Participants talked of how specific LGBT communities developed in relation to broader (negative) social contexts, such as the desire for ‘safer’ spaces or networks of people. The importance of feeling more ‘comfortable’, ‘relaxed’ and/or ‘at ease’ when with other LGBT people and/or in what was experienced as LGBT space emerged throughout this study, but was particularly important in why LGBT people “magnetise” towards each other (see also Johnston and Valentine, 1995; Valentine, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1994). For some, this was also seen to facilitate or encourage the development of particular communities (commercial or otherwise), further evidenced by migration patterns among LGBT people (see Chapter 5). In other words, many participants felt that the friendships, groups or communities they formed were directly related to broader social contexts, whether these be described as ‘oppressive’ or ‘less comfortable’:

“I just think we naturally flock to people who are like us... If we stopped having as much LGBT oppression, then we probably would stop having such strong LGBT communities” (Helen)

“Because we’ve spent years and years of so much oppression, sometimes you kind of get like forced into this group and it becomes a safety barrier for you. And now we have clubs that we can go to and events we can go to because we know it’s safe and we’ll be accepted. So I see that as a really positive thing” (Julie)

“If you can associate yourself with a group of people you feel more comfortable... and feel that we’re safe with one another” (Timothy).

Reference was also made to the importance of communities in the past:

“It was a lot worse 20, 30, 40 years ago and I think that there was a need for that sense of solidarity and to have a beacon that others could aim for... that’s almost like the grandparents of the community is those little places where we had to go because it was illegal, or this or that” (Jodi).

Referring to the establishment of a group of friends via *Arena Three*<sup>2</sup>, Ruth commented:

“It was just wonderful, it was like the first time in your whole life there was a gang of people there you could be completely open with... hard to describe now because it was all so different... it was very, very important... that to me feels like real community... that community that we had when it was a kind of ghetto... the ghetto was where you could easily find your own”.

Ruth was clear that a sense of community for her had come from sharing experiences of oppression and/or the “effect of the closet”, “at a time when we couldn’t share it with anyone else”. She argued that if people are told, or made to feel, they do not ‘belong’, they will make a place where they do, which could be interpreted as a lesbian or gay ‘ghetto’. The changing social context, therefore, meant that she found more recent communities somewhat harder to define.

Some people highlighted physical spaces or events linked to developing communities:

“That’s why gay bars exist, gay bars don’t exist because gay people don’t like straight people, gay bars exist because we feel that we need them so we can be ourselves” (Carl)

“I suppose for me there’s a need to have a community because we are a minority and we’re a minority that a lot of people still don’t accept. So being... a community that can take over some street and act like every other straight person could on any other day of the week is important to us because we can’t do that on a Monday through Sunday... I think it’s about not feeling isolated and alone” (Jackie).

Petra suggested that several factors linked to the development of communities were “inseparable”: she argued that violent oppression led to consciousness-raising, which then led to the development of a social scene, which was then supplemented by increased commercialism, leading in turn to more developments.

Whether chosen or “forced” into them, it was clear that LGBT communities provide what is lacking in wider society for some people: a place where LGBT people can feel comfortable and safe, whether this be physically or in some less tangible way. This was not the only reason given why LGBT people come together, though, as political activism was also seen to play an integral role in the development of communities.

### **Politics, activism and seeking social change**

A key area where participants identified factors that had contributed to the development of communities was in relation to activism and particular political campaigns, whether they be historical, or more recent. The Stonewall ‘riots’ in New York, Section 28 and ‘equal marriage’ were the specific examples most often cited.

Some participants focussed on how politics and campaigning, or awareness of particular issues, could bring people together and help form or strengthen relationships and ‘commonalities’:

“For me it has always been important... to be part of something bigger that can help move things forward in a political sense... I think it [community] arose from political activism... that’s why people come together because they feel oppressed... It’s keeping [community] alive and stopping discrimination” (Liz)

“In the past you had to have some sort of community to put forward a united front to fight for equal rights and human rights, so I think it organically grew” (Dilys).

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<sup>2</sup> *Arena Three* was the first British lesbian magazine (see Jennings, 2007a).

It was also recognised that not everyone is interested in politics, however:

“A lot of people don’t really care, they just want to go to the pub and that was quite a disappointing realisation for me, that gay clubs are not full of politically mobilised people... but you find your people and then you find your people within the people I suppose... communities within communities I guess” (Gemma).

Some respondents acknowledged the role of (others’) previous activism in their current lives:

“I am aware that the ease of my coming out has been as a result of those who have stood up and been counted over the years. I am very grateful to my community” (Survey respondent 97: female lesbian aged 45-54)

“I do acknowledge that it is the struggles of LGB & T people of the past that have made it possible for me to live the integrated life that I do, and for that reason I partly work in the field of supporting those who identify as LGB or T and are not able to live well because of that” (Survey respondent 34: female aged 45-54, does not “self identify sexually, but others would call me a lesbian”).

Fin now felt it was down to the ‘next generation’ to “progress further” because she had grown “fed up” of “fighting”, following years of involvement in pushing for disability and/or LGBT rights. Bryn thought that “the movement has stopped”. He identified “a movement away from something but not towards anything”, and commented “[I’ve] been with switchboards all my life and there’s so many gone down the drain”.

Changes in the broader, global context were also highlighted:

“I do feel as though at this moment in time we’ve taken two steps forward and now we’ve taking one step back... look at Russia, the legislation that they’re trying to pass... It feels as though the international community is now kind of taking a step backwards, which is why it’s more important than ever to be pushing the boundaries forward... equal marriage and things like that [are] moving forward, but at the same time it’s not consistent” (Colin).

A number of participants identified communities as important sites of ‘readiness’ for resistance and lobbying:

“For me the concept of community is really important because for marginal communities to be able to mobilise they have to have a community; you can’t mobilise one person... to be part of a community, to be able to access others when the shit hits the fan, not to put too fine a point on it, is important” (Gemma).

Overall, views on developments of, and within, communities, as well as broader society, were often inseparable from individuals’ own experiences of physical or virtual ‘spaces’, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

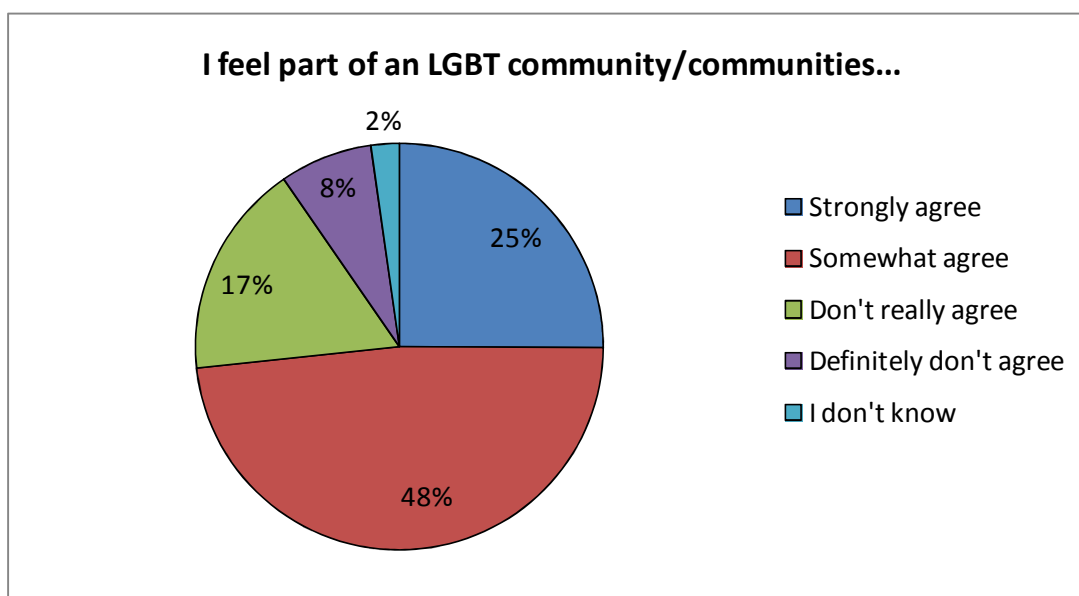
## Chapter 5: Experiences of 'community' and impacts for wellbeing

This chapter examines a variety of experiences of LGBT communities, and looks at the potential impact of these for LGBT 'wellbeing'. Using in-depth and survey data, as well as drawing on existing literature, it explores subthemes relating to inclusion/exclusion, 'space', Pride events, online communities, and wellbeing.



The survey asked people whether they felt part of one or more LGBT communities. As Chart 2 suggests, the largest proportion of respondents 'somewhat' felt part of one or more LGBT communities (just less than half), followed by those that 'strongly' did so (a quarter). A quarter did not feel part of one or more LGBT communities.

Chart 2: Community 'membership'



### **Inclusion, exclusion and 'diversity'**

The focus in this chapter is on personal experiences of in/exclusion and perceptions of 'divisions' within/between LGBT communities. Whilst it has been argued that using the terms inclusion and exclusion suggests a more simplified view than is the case (Keogh et al, 2004), nevertheless they were the terms most often used by participants, and for this reason will be used. Sometimes participants felt exclusion in relation to physical space, as described in the exchange below:

“It feels as though [the scene] is not a community for LGBT people; it feels it’s a community for the lesbians of [town] and the fashion lesbians and the scene queens and you find that a lot and that’s not a community to me. That’s just a group of people who are like pulling, posing and pill-popping, simple as that... and therefore we’re excluded from that community (Julie)

“It’s quite aggressive but at the same time it’s almost a fearful scenario... if you were to take a girl that had not been seen before, it’s almost as if like they become vultures, don’t they? (Jo)

“A predatorial lesbian... (Julie)

“Very predatorial. But at the same time, about the acceptance, if that’s the only place you are going to be able to go to you’ve almost got to go... unless you go like out of town” (Jo).

Whilst some exclusions appeared to be based on individual circumstances, the issue of particular groups within the LGBT acronym being less ‘welcomed’ within some communities was clear. As Jo summarised:

“There’s kind of conflict within itself. If that’s supposed to be our safe haven, it’s not because again there’s oppression within that community”.

This was particularly highlighted in relation to biphobia, also identified in other recent evidence (Barker, 2012; Barker et al, 2012; Traies, 2012; Valentine and Skelton, 2003):

“Lesbian and gay communities do not understand bisexuality, bi people or bi communities and discriminate against us, further excluding and isolating us, creating more hate crime and discrimination and preventing bisexual people from being accepted and understood in society” (Survey respondent 107: bisexual cisgendered female aged 25-34)

“My personal experience of community as a bisexual woman has been fairly negative - very much dominated by the “fake lesbian” thing (i.e. “real” gay people being suspicious of bis because so many girls were “faking it”)” (Survey respondent 454: bisexual female aged 35-44).

Bisexuality was also an identity that was applied to those who did not define themselves as such. One woman, for example, was defined by others as bisexual on dating websites because she had been married to a man previously, but for her this did not acknowledge her coming out as a lesbian later in life.

Some participants identified ‘hierarchies’ or “pecking orders”, with gay men often “top of the heap”, and trans people often viewed as the ‘bottom’:

“It [community] does show a hierarchy of LGBT. T people are not very well treated in that community often and I used to work on the scene and staff were not, a lot of staff were not particularly supportive of trans people” (Gemma)

“In my experience just because people are queer/LGBT doesn’t make them less discriminating in other ways, which means a lot of the same hierarchies and oppressive relationships exist also in queer communities, which generally don’t make them safe spaces unless you ‘fit in’” (Survey respondent 424: “queer/lesbian/bi/not sure (it depends on how I feel that day)” female aged 25-34).

This notion of hierarchies has also been discussed in existing literature, in connection with a ‘bodily hierarchy’ among gay men (Simpson, 2012b, 2012c), a ‘gay social hierarchy’ linked to HIV-related stigma (Smit et al, 2012), and in relation to trans identities (Hines, 2010). In this study, whilst Fiona felt that “policing” in the trans community continued around particular (gendered) expectations, Petra thought that things had improved but recognised that there were still differences of opinion within trans communities. One survey respondent suggested:



“Being part of the trans community is a political necessity. It also does your head in because it is so divisive” (Survey respondent 598: straight female aged 45-54).

The complexity of trans identities and limitations of a gender binary have been identified elsewhere (e.g. see Hines, 2010; Sanger, 2008), and have implications for using the concept community: “subjective nuances highlight the difficulties of theorizing ‘community’ as based on shared identity. Moreover, varied levels of involvement in transgender support groups... challenge the understanding of ‘community’ as based upon active collective participation” (Hines, 2007: 481-2). As one survey respondent noted:

“As an intersex and trans person seeking medical treatment I faded out of any communities after I’d got my body sorted” (Survey respondent 612: heterosexual male aged 45-54).

Other forms of prejudice were also witnessed or experienced within LGBT communities. Gerry recalled an incident when he was younger and attended a gay night in a city near to his home town. He remembered how excited he had felt but then what a “horrible feeling” it was to experience racism from his (gay) ‘peers’. As he put it: “a community that is allowing you space to be yourself, to discover yourself, is actually being critical of you as well”. Gerry made reference to feeling ‘sensitive’ to the potential for racism when other LGBT people become “careless” after drinking. This also influenced his use of LGBT ‘space’, such as at World Pride. A survey respondent also referred to a level of racism:

“When I have attended Pride events, almost everyone there has been white; this has changed somewhat this year, but not by much. Since I’ve become more educated in black activism, I have seen a significant amount of racism within the LGBT communities, and that puts me off” (Survey respondent 158: female “bisexual (though I prefer pansexual as a term)” aged 18-24).

The potential for racism and/or invisibility of BME people within particular LGB communities has been documented in previous research (Deverell and Prout, 1995; Eisenstadt and Gatter, 1999; Formby, 2011a; Homfray, 2007; Keogh et al, 2004; Simpson, 2012c; Weeks et al, 2001; Yip, 2008). Rogers identified racism within ‘gay spaces’ which meant for some the phrase ‘coming into’ more accurately reflected their experiences than the more widely used ‘coming out’, i.e. to ‘come into’ racism, commercialism, drug use, and so on. To not ‘come into’ particular identities, communities and/or spaces was therefore not about ‘being in the closet’ but could be an active choice not to engage in/with certain spaces or communities (Rogers, 2012; see also Keogh et al, 2004 for similar themes about coming/being ‘out’).

Keogh et al (2004: 30) identified the ways in which black gay men are objectified and sexualised on the scene. In their study, sexual commodification was accepted as ‘integral’ to the scene, but became “animated, painful or significant when it mobilises broader social inequality or political difference” (Keogh et al, 2004: 40). In conclusion, they emphasised the strong links, particularly on the scene, between objectification, sexual stereotyping, bodily commodification and ethnicity, questioning “can such sexual commodification be rightfully called racism (when it is organised around sexual desire)?” (Keogh et al, 2004: 46).

Jaspal (2012: 767) has written about the contrasting experiences of British Indian and British Pakistani gay men, exploring the intersections of ethnicity, faith and sexual identity, and concluding that whilst homosexuality can be “socially problematic” for British Indian gay men, it can be both “socially and psychologically problematic” for British Pakistanis.

Existing evidence has also examined the impact of age on scene participation or ‘consumption’ (Binnie, 1995; Cant, 2008; Casey, 2007; Ellis, 2007b; Flowers and Hart, 1999; MacKian and Goldring, 2010; Taylor, 2008; Yip, 1996). Simpson’s research (2012a, 2012b, 2012c) identified issues about dress, appearance and ageism among gay men (both towards older and younger men). Some similar themes emerged in this research:



“I feel as though there is more discrimination within the, I wouldn’t call it the LGBT community because it’s not the LGBT community, but the scene... because I’m kind of like an older guy, I’m plus 30 so therefore I’m kind of on the scrap heap, nobody will sort of entertain you, nobody will want to talk to you” (Colin).

Participants also raised issues about (dis)ability and inclusion:

“As a disabled lesbian with a chronic illness who came out late in life my local community lesbian group has been a lifeline” (Survey respondent 497: female lesbian aged 55-64).

However, exclusion was more often raised (see also Cant, 2008; Casey, 2007; Homfray, 2007):

“As a disabled lesbian I feel rejected and discriminated against in the ‘LBGT community’” (Survey respondent 604: female lesbian aged 45-54)

“Having disabilities and being treated for cancer and as a result having a reduced immune system has had an effect on how some LGBT people and straight people react with me. Some of the gay community regard me less favourably since becoming disabled” (Survey respondent 165: gay man aged 55-64).

Sometimes what was described was not necessarily discrimination, but differences in experience, especially related to age. Participants identified particular LGBT social groups or spaces that tended to appeal to different ages, so that older and younger individuals were unlikely to socialise together (see also Howes, 2011; Simpson, 2012a; and for a contrasting view Valentine, 1995). For fuller discussion of the impact of ageism, ageing and/or the experiences of older LGB people see Archibald, 2010; Cronin and King, 2010; Heaphy et al, 2003; Knockner, 2012; Pugh, 2002. Survey respondents commented:

“I am an out lesbian both at work and home and, over many years have found the concept of an LGBT ‘community’ to be a myth. I don’t wish to base my social life around the pubs/clubs on the ‘scene’ but even now that’s all there seems to be. As an older woman I have no choice but to go to heterosexual venues and join heterosexual groups as they provide more choice and variety” (Survey respondent 487: female lesbian aged 45-54)

“Ageism within the gay community forgets the campaign we started in the late sixties for equality so we are pushed aside - it would be good to have some sort of buddy system similar to that for people with HIV/AIDS befriending elderly gay people living alone and due to immobility are isolated” (Survey respondent 319: gay male aged 65+).

For some (older) age was related to evolving social contexts:

“At one point in my life from 1980-1990 when I was a founder member of a local gay switchboard I felt a huge sense of gay community. From going on marches, writing to local papers, achieving a physical and virtual presence for gay people where there had been none, I made a great deal of effort and experienced much sense of success. Since then almost everyone I knew then and was part of the programme has died... as no one really wants to hear about my experiences now, I feel almost totally disconnected from any gay community” (Survey respondent 576: gay male aged 45-54)

“I was born into a world where I could have gone to prison because my name was in someone’s address book. Now I have laws to protect my rights. I am one of a generation of men who has had this transition in life, from shame to visibility. I sometimes envy younger men and wish I too were young. But I also know and relish my story, my past and what I have in common with other men and women of my age” (Survey respondent 480: gay man aged 55-64).

Alison suggested things were not always ‘easier’, just ‘different’:

“What’s different for these kids these days is that complacency which weren’t there... when I came out and I belonged to the scene there was a sense of belonging... there was a sense of family... and I don’t think that’s there [now]... I think going out socially now is about going out, getting wrecked, getting laid, how many drugs can you take”.

Carl also highlighted “segregation” between gay men and gay women, with separate magazines such as *Diva* and *Gay Times* being used as an illustration of his point. He commented:

“I’d really like to kind of just have this forum where it’s not about whether you’re a lesbian or whether you’re gay, it’s about whether you’re gay as in an overriding term... there is this kind of segregation I suppose whereas I don’t think it should really be like that” (Carl).

Liz also suggested:

“Historically gay men and lesbian woman have very different histories and so I think it doesn’t always sit very easily together, so when I first went to a committee meeting about setting something new up and there were no women there, I asked the chairperson who said ‘the lesbians like to keep themselves to themselves’”.

A gender imbalance on (male-dominated) scenes has been explained as a result of less focus on the ‘lesbian pound’ (Casey, 2007). It has also been suggested that women seek personal relationships and social networks over and above ‘spatial superiority’ so therefore do not seek space to the same extent as men (Castells, 1983), though this has been contested by the suggestion that lesbian communities or ‘ghettos’ are just less visible (Bell and Valentine, 1995b; Valentine, 1994, 1995, 2000).

The potential impact of social class on (LGB) life experiences has been highlighted previously (see e.g. Heaphy, 2012; Jennings, 2007b; McDermott, 2011; Taylor, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009). Whilst this theme is not explored in great depth here, issues about class and financial resources were identified within the research. Laura, for example, felt that there was “segregation” between “the haves and the have nots” in some of the groups she had attended - she was clear that the ‘pink pound’ was not a ‘reality’ for everybody. However, Ruth suggested that some groups or networks could be “cross-class” (see also Homfray, 2007; Jennings, 2007b; Valentine, 1993a, 1994, 1995; Weeks et al, 2001 for suggestion of this).

Some participants acknowledged their ‘privileged’ position and its impact on their relationship to ‘community’:

“Being middle class and in an academic profession makes being ‘out’ much easier, and means that I can rely on economic privilege and liberal structures at work for support, rather than on the LGBT community” (Survey respondent 46: lesbian/bisexual female aged 35-44)

“I’m an academic, so perhaps have more opportunities for community in the workplace than others - I work in a large, liberal organisation” (Survey respondent 418: gay male aged 45-54).

Sometimes it was the ‘small town’ environment that caused issues for people, for instance with gossip and/or ‘incestuous’ networks (Valentine, 1993a, 1995):

“You just want to go to a place where, you know, your friends haven’t slept with your girlfriend and that’s what it’s like. And even if you’ve had any sort of connection with anyone in this town... I can guarantee if I walked in there [gay venue] it would be, ‘she’s sleeping with so and so, she slept with so and so...’” (Julie).

It has also been suggested, however, that lesbians are more likely to keep ex-lovers as friends, so as not to isolate each other from particular communities or networks (Valentine, 1993a, 1994, 1995).

Spirituality or faith was significant for some: Laura explained that she could not be as 'out' as she would like to be within her faith community, but at the same time did not wish to participate in a "shocking" scene-based LGBT community. For her, finding a partner of (similar) faith was difficult. She was aware of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement but it was not very accessible to her for practical reasons. A fuller discussion of the intersections between faith and LGBT identities (and communities) is not possible here, but more in-depth analysis is available in, for example, Browne et al, 2010; Duggan, 2012; Hunt, 2009; Yip, 1996, 2008; Yip et al, 2011; Yip and Keenan, 2009. Issues of faith were also played out on the project website and within the survey:

"It has been quite a rough couple of months for me at church... The faith in God that I was so certain about a year ago and the sexual identity that was so preciously defined by myself over the past forty odd years (lesbian at least) have been brought into question. Of course as a liberal politically I would go for gay marriage and not just blessings but my God appears to not be ready for this" (Website contribution)

"Within the gay community religious beliefs, although not held strongly, are often open to ridicule, so I have learned that it is not appropriate to discuss them" (Survey respondent 502: gay male aged 35-44)

"The LGBT friends I feel most connected with are a number of people who share the same faith and who have known what it's like to battle to reconcile sexuality with Christianity. My coming out was delayed for many years because my faith taught me homosexuality was "sinful". When I finally acknowledged that I am gay, the first people I sought out for support online were LGBT Christians" (Survey respondent 206: female lesbian aged 35-44).

The diversity of experiences within LGBT lives was also demonstrated by parents who did not always feel they could find a 'place' (physical or otherwise) for themselves within a (local) LGBT community (see also Ellis, 2007a; Taylor, 2009; Valentine, 1995):

"I feel much less part of an LGBT community over the last 10 years and certainly this distance has increased since I've had children. Largely the scene locally is structured around men and alcohol/clubs. Neither of these hold a lot of interest for me as a lesbian parent in her 40s. I want my children to have a sense of their alternative heritage and the positives I have historically gained from the support of the lesbian community, however there is often a distance created as the child-centric world is still very straight and the gay world is still very non-child friendly" (Survey respondent 246: female lesbian aged 35-44).

There was also a degree of 'self-policing' among some parents:

"I identified as lesbian later on in life and my 'physical' involvement in the LGBT community has been affected by my reluctance to 'come out' whilst my children are younger... The opportunities within my locality and a little further afield mean that I cannot visit the 'scene' or become involved in other groups, given that I would easily be 'outed'... This affects my development as an LGBT identified person which does feel restrictive" (Survey respondent 505: female lesbian aged 45-54).

Parents were often keen to have other (visible) LGB friends to demonstrate to their children that their identity and/or relationship were 'normal':

"One of the reasons I wanted to get in touch with people when I moved here was [for] my daughter's sake, so that she knew that there were other same sex couples around and that it was OK and healthy before she was going to school" (Liz).

Overall, there were a variety of examples of communities and/or spaces being experienced as unwelcoming and/or exclusionary, in addition to spaces that were felt to be less appealing and/or appropriate for some people. These point to the diversity of experience that may be overlooked in assumptions and/or language use relating to, particularly a singular, 'LGBT community'. However,

experiences of spaces that were linked to participants' understandings of their own (LGBT) communities were also viewed positively, where attention now turns.

### **(Un)safe spaces**

Many participants discussed positive feelings about 'LGBT space', which for many was linked to 'the scene', at least for part of their lives:

"When I was younger the scene was like a Mecca for me. Like I grew up in a small town which is just short of an hour on the train from [city] and making that journey was really important... I guess there's still that thing unfortunately and fortunately... it's just more comfortable sometimes to go there and it's as simple as that... unfortunately, they're not [now] the kind of pubs I would choose to go to otherwise" (Gemma)

"You can go for lunch there with your partner or someone and no-one stares at you and no-one comments and you get much less sexual harassment... if I go to a straight bar with my partner you get so much hassle. I just end up punching people... in the gay community it's less and I think that's why a lot of straight people actually go there as well sometimes" (Helen)

"What I do in my social life, my personal life, does tend to rotate around being able to go to places where I feel comfortable going, so for example this weekend I'm going to Blackpool and we'll go round the bars... it gets me through the week... it keeps me going, you know... I know there's almost a certainty that I'm with my own kind" (Timothy).

This notion of 'diversionary' consumerism to 'keep one going' has also been discussed by Binnie (1995). Often the 'need' or 'want' to go out on the scene was expressed in terms of comfort or safety in relation to having a visible LGBT identity; being able to show physical affection was the most frequently cited example. Fiona and Ben, for instance, highlighted the advantage of being able to hold hands, kiss and dance with their partners at ease.

Often participants talked about their local scene as "limited" (whether in size or variety), but there was often a sense that there was 'no choice' but to go there anyway, for the above reasons. Ruth suggested that whilst pubs are nominally 'shared spaces', in 'reality' they can be "very masculine" and "very straight". The need to feel welcome was important for her, and she recalled times when her and her partner had travelled "a long way" to a gay-owned place in order to feel 'safe', or had met in friends' homes to ensure safety. This practice (whether through 'choice' or necessity), particularly for lesbians and/or those with less financial resources to 'go out', has been documented over a number of years (see e.g. Browne and Bakshi, 2011; Jennings, 2007b; Valentine, 1993b). Simpson (2012a), however, has pointed to the potential exclusion of gay men on a low income who are less able to participate in 'dinner party' or 'barbeque' circuits. Ruth cited the potential, albeit temporary, significance of specific events creating 'safe space', such as a lesbian arts festival that had run for many years: "Life was pretty hard for lesbians in [city] coz' there wasn't any scene or anything".

Some people no longer went out on the scene as much as they used to, for a number of reasons, such as being in a relationship, or getting 'bored' of the (small) local scene, or particular venues. It was also noted that the scene could be interpreted as only being for a particular section of any LGBT community:

"The gay scene is for young people. Not that I'm ancient or anything, but the gay scene is for people of a very, here especially, it's for a very specific demographic. It's also very white, which is something I should definitely say" (Gemma).

The perception that the commercial scene focuses on young LGBT people, and more realistically young gay men, is a theme that emerged in Casey's work (2007), where Newcastle was dubbed as targeting the 'youth pound'.

Some people had experienced negative responses to their 'image' on the scene, which could make them feel excluded or uncomfortable:

"I find that I suffer from internalised homophobia and body dysmorphia which is exacerbated by the scene, a bullying and elitist attitude by gay men, the media (such as Gaydar never portraying happy larger men any more - just muscle guys)" (Survey respondent 298: gay male aged 35-44)

"I have had negative experiences on the gay scene in [city] because it's very homogenous and it's very mainstream and people don't necessarily like the way I dress or that kind of stuff... my ex, who had a lot of piercings and stuff, was often kind of treated with quite a lot of disdain in mainstream gay places" (Gemma).

Implicit 'dress codes' were interpreted as physical barriers to accessing LGBT space, via the 'policing' of door staff at scene venues:

"I normally wear dresses and skirts and have long hair and I often don't get into clubs or I won't get in if I'm not with my partner. So there's this very strict stereotype which includes disablist attitudes and racist attitudes and sexist attitudes, sort of around who is and who isn't allowed, in a very physical way, not allowed in. And I think that's part of the reason sometimes I can't be bothered to go out because I can't be bothered to argue with somebody on the door... there's a definite thing around appearance... that can have really negative effects on people" (Helen).

'Dress codes' might be experienced as pressures to conform, for those who want to access particular communities or venues (Simpson, 2012a; Taylor, 2007; Valentine, 1993b; Valentine and Skelton, 2003). Carl identified similar pressures for men in describing the 'demands' for gay men to have "ripped" bodies, as seen in the gay press (see also Casey, 2007). He also wondered if nightclubs focussing on gay men heightened these pressures, precisely because they were not a 'mixed' environment. Ben also suggested that gay bars could be dominated by "very hyper-masculine young men". It should be noted, though, that there is also evidence of (young men's) pleasure in paying attention to their image, and potentially having it emulated (Valentine and Skelton, 2003).

As mentioned earlier, for some young people the inaccessibility of scene venues made meeting more LGB young people difficult:

"For me, being a young person, it's hard for me to find people my age... I'm just fed up of being single, me, and I want to find a nice boy but you can't round [here] because it's just not open enough" (Jason).

For Jason, Manchester offered legendary opportunities to meet other young gay men, but - for the time being at least - the city was unreachable for him (such imaginings of an 'urban idyll' have also been documented elsewhere; see Browne, 2008). Inaccessibility was not always restricted to age; participants also identified lack of money (see also Binnie, 1995; Taylor, 2005, 2007, 2008) and/or (rural) location as potential barriers (see also Bell and Valentine, 1995a; Browne, 2008; Ellis, 2007b; Taylor, 2008):

"For me the 'community' needs to be where I live. I would have to travel about an hour to get to a lesbian pub. I cannot afford to do that. There are other 'gays in the village' according to my GP but she cannot tell me who they are so I cannot find them. They might be 'friends in waiting'. There is a gay parenting group about 45 mins away but they meet... when my kids are with their Dad" (Survey respondent 550: female lesbian aged 35-44)

"We've got two Scotlands. We've got central belt Scotland which is populated, it has a reasonable transport infrastructure, it has resources, it has services, it has all these things and it has a pretty dense population. And then we have the other Scotland, which is everywhere North and South of the central belt which is a huge part of the country... when

you're talking about kind of service provision you have to take this into account... To be honest, you can't even tell them to go on the internet because sometimes they don't have it... that is really a pressing point for isolated parts of Scotland" (Gemma).

Bell and Valentine (1995a: 120) discussed (negative) experiences of rural life and associated lack of (commercial) visible 'LGBT spaces', whilst also recognising that "the rural can be a place of fantasy and utopia, a place for living an idyllic 'gay' life... a place of escape from the evils of the city".

The ability of heterosexual people to also access the scene was seen as problematic, illustrated in the discussion below:

"I go in this bar and there are all these heterosexuals dancing on the floor, and I felt myself going like 'what the hell are you doing here?' but not only that... I didn't [dance] because immediately after all these years of not having gone to places like lesbian bars or anything I felt I don't want these men watching (Luce)

"I remember going into [city] once and like I was getting quite annoyed because I was thinking 'look, you've got the rest of bloody [city]! You know, you've allowed us this area, sod off! Go away!' (Jackie)

"...I just feel less comfortable, safe I should say (Luce)

"...I think we all know sort of on [street] there are certain bars you don't go to because it's going to be mainly heterosexual people and you're going to be sort of gawked at (Adam)

"...Well strangely enough it's about equality rights. So the view is that if you want to come and go in our bars - and I say our bars because that was the original intent, it was somewhere where we would feel safe... then you've got to reciprocate. So if we want to go into [a straight pub] in [a small city] for our Sunday dinner and sit there and hold hands, then we don't want to get gawked at as we tuck into our Yorkshire pudding, right, and that to me is the equality bit" (Timothy).

Views about heterosexual consumption on/of the scene, and its impact on perceived gay and lesbian safety and/or enjoyment are discussed further in Homfray (2007). Broader concerns about the consumption and commodification of the scene were also raised:

"There's a specific [city] scene which the reason it's so homogenised is because it's mainly owned by one group... It's a constant pain in the somewhere and it's really difficult because it's very controlled, it's very corporate, it's very money driven. It tries to stamp out DIY things that start. It sells to young people a concept of this is how you are gay... and I say gay for a reason. I don't say this is how you are LGBT because actually that outfit is not really interested in LGBT and it's not interested in community. It's interested in the pink pound... It's not that I am anti those places, it's just that I'm anti the ones that we have here" (Gemma).

In one group there was nostalgia for how the local scene had once been. They stressed that now there was only commercial LGBT spaces left in the city, but that that had not always been the case. There was a feeling that things had "gone backwards" and that 'gay bar owners' did not support 'gay communities'. Similarly, Ben said he felt that there was 'in-fighting' within communities about who benefits commercially. Taylor similarly documented a tendency for her (working class lesbian) participants to remember the past with a sense of loss and/or nostalgia (Taylor, 2008).

Other aspects of 'commercialism' aimed at LGBT communities were also discussed, with the gay press in particular singled out for some criticism:

"People buy [magazine] out of some misplaced loyalty... Nobody reads it. Everyone hates it... people buy it because they have this 'you know, we have to buy it and show willing'... but nobody reads it, nobody cares about it... If it had to compete in the everyday sort of commercial magazine world it wouldn't last for more than a week" (Dilys).

Shourjo felt that 'mainstream' gay magazines make assumptions about what readers want. He found a predominant focus on sex and/or "pictures" "troubling" and said he would never expect an "insightful article" from such publications. Gerry agreed that there was a 'gap in the market' for more "critical or analytical commentary". He suggested that the 'pink pound' has much potential to provide information and services to people, but that currently it is "so limited".

'LGBT space' was not always tied directly to the scene. For Ruth, who lived in an area with a large, visible, LGBT population - evidenced, for example, by the numbers of rainbow flags flying in the city - there was a broader sense that "these are my tribe, this is where I belong", but also a feeling that, really, that was "not real life". For those that did not live in such a location the acknowledged modification of behaviour in non-scene space was often stark. This 'self-censorship', 'self-regulation' or 'self-surveillance' frequently limited participants' geographical space and could prevent public displays of affection, or acknowledgement of partner 'status', as documented in previous research (Binnie, 1995; Browne, 2008; Simpson, 2012c; Valentine, 1993b, 1993c, 1994; Weeks et al, 2001):

"...so for example, you come from a big city so you know your wallet you don't put it in your outer pockets. You know that, it's ingrained, and I realise that... I don't go to certain places. I'm very aware of that... perhaps this kind of ingrained sixth sense that you develop over the years" (Luce)

"You see, me and my partner never really did that [showed affection in public] so sometimes we meet people and we just kind of weigh them up... we've sort of held that back a bit I guess" (Philippa).

Where people lived in areas without a visible LGBT space, and sometimes for those that did, specific groups often provided an opportunity to share experiences and provide mutual support or 'credibility'. The groups most often mentioned were work-based, or provided within the voluntary sector, though university-based groups were also identified:

"This [work] group for me is an enabler for us to have a credible position in the community. So for example, me alone wanting to take part in Pride I wouldn't do it, but by being part of this group I feel comfortable that we as a collective group can go and represent [employer] in the community as a credible organisation" (Timothy)

"My fiancée was the chair of a university LGBT group when we met so our relationship has always been heavily connected to the importance of LGBT community. We have both attended several universities in new cities. The university LGBT group is always the first group we go to and are always hugely welcoming. We tend to become well known quickly in a community. Without the LGBT community in a city we both feel quite isolated and unhappy (Survey respondent 552: "polysexual (or bisexual depending on the person asking)" female aged 25-34).

Much more broadly, the desire for safety and/or visible LGBT space could mean people's 'choices' about where to live were influenced by their gender and/or sexual identities. This issue has also been documented previously, for example in research identifying participants 'escaping' their home environments, whether familial or geographical (Cant, 1997; Eisenstadt and Gatter, 1999; Homfray, 2007; Scourfield et al, 2008; Valentine, 1993b, 1993c; Valentine et al, 2003). Migration has also been documented in moves towards desired environments as well as away from hostile ones (Howes, 2011), and in relation to moving towards more urban rather than rural locales generally, because of their assumed greater anonymity and/or LGB population size (Browne, 2008; Taylor, 2007; Valentine, 1993a, 1993c; Valentine and Skelton, 2003). In this study there were examples of people who had made decisions about where to live linked to their sexuality, both in the more distant and very recent past, and some who did not 'rule out' such decisions for the future:

"I feel the need to be part of an LGBT community more outweighs the other needs in my life regarding community and where I live. This has meant that I feel I need to stay in Manchester rather than move closer to friends and family. I feel this struggle continually and worry that not

being close to a large LGBT community could isolate me and my husband” (Survey respondent 100: gay man aged 25-34)

“My partner and I live in [area] which is quite a dodgy area really. We can’t be together in that we can’t hold hands, so I’m looking to move or we’re looking to move to [area] because it’s a far more cosmopolitan area... it’s only like five miles down the road, but it’s a totally different culture there” (Megan)

“Who knows... if you’re able to live as open as you are able to be at an event like Pride... there was a different freedom, if a city or a certain part of a city allows that to happen... there may be some appeal in that” (Gerry).

Others had not necessarily left the area, but left their family home. Ben explained that in order to “sort his own head” prior to coming out he had to leave the “traditional working class masculine environment” that was his family home. For Gemma, both where she lived and where she worked had been influenced by her identity:

“It’s not a terrible place I come from, but it doesn’t have a gay scene, so I moved to [city] and I guess made use of the scene at that time... definitely the work that I’ve done... has been completely driven by my identity... I’ve made a career out of being a lesbian” (Gemma).

For others, their working lives also impacted upon their relationship to ‘community’:

“[I] do research in LGBT area which is currently the biggest part of feeling any part of LGBT community” (Survey respondent 516: bisexual female aged 45-54)

“I work in a role offering support to LGBT people which leaves me exhausted and “gayed” out at the end of the week, so my own quality of life has suffered in terms of my motivation to be part of an LGBT community in my own time” (Survey respondent 418: gay male aged 45-54).

Many participants were aware of other people leaving more rural areas to move to London or other large cities:

“Most of the people in rural Wales will move out because of the lack of support, because of the lack of understanding, and they will move to the bigger cities” (Dilys)

“[In] the LGBT community we know that people migrate to the cities, like that historically has been the case” (Gemma).

Some workers were also concerned that young people migrating to cities from rural areas without secure finances or housing could be “so much more vulnerable”, with very complex needs. Others have also pointed to risks in assuming that the ‘pink pound’ affords everyone the ability to choose their home (Browne, 2008; Taylor, 2007). It was also suggested, however, how needs can change through the life course:

“While in my 20s going out to gay bars and going to Pride were very prominent in my life. That was my sense of community then. And online dating. Now I am in my 40s, settled down with my partner, and we are about to become parents. I still go and support Pride but my gay life now will be about rainbow families’ picnics” (Survey respondent 253: female lesbian aged 35-44)

“I do feel my answers would have been quite different if I had answered this when I was coming out over 5 years ago. I am at a point where I have made quite a few LGBT friends and feel comfortable with my identity but I remember struggling while coming out and wondering (1) what it means to be part of an LGBT community/communities and (2) how to even begin accessing these! It was a slow process and somewhat frustrating at times but I’m happy to be where I am now” (Survey respondent 265: female lesbian aged 25-34)



“I think as well your decision to live is also about where you are in your life... Whatever we say today, in five years you could ask the same group of people and we could have different wants and needs” (Jackie).

In addition to migration, foreign travel was also identified as an important issue for some participants. This could be interpreted as ‘checking out’ or experiencing other cultures or LGBT spaces:

“When I go to Thailand we can be together everywhere. The guard comes completely down... the only homophobic experience that we’ve had there was from a European tourist... it’s just embedded within the culture there that men can hold hands, kiss in the street, whatever... that is very enlightening as an experience to go there” (Timothy)

“If I go on holiday, yeah, I definitely will check out the gay scene in that place. We went to New York, we checked out a couple of places; when I was in San Francisco, I checked out some places... I’m interested to see what scenes are like and it’s a place where I would feel comfortable to go as a tourist because I’d feel it was safer” (Gemma).

There might also be an element of ‘self-regulation’ (see above), where LGBT people make decisions about destinations based on potential enjoyment and/or safety:

“I’ve always struggled myself about why I have this need to go to holiday destinations where I can feel safe because I know many people just go anywhere like, but I did that one year, against my better judgement. I went to Mexico and it was horrendous. It was full of like Americans, but not only Americans but drunk Americans and homophobic Americans, and they are the worst, and they made it a nightmare. You know, my boyfriend got picked on so much. One of them even put hot soup in the restaurant in his lap... we’re never going anywhere again where we cannot be together at a time when we should be enjoying ourselves and being able to be ourselves” (Timothy).

Ben also described an experience on holiday where he had “oppressed” his identity because he did not feel able to be ‘out’. He said he had not considered his sexuality in relation to holidays before, but would think about it now and would not return to Turkey for this reason. On future holidays, like Timothy, he said he wanted to be “safe” and able to be ‘himself’. Similarly, Fiona said she was aware her travel “options” were restricted as a woman in a relationship with another woman.

Helen had also thought about her sexuality in relation to decisions about studying abroad:

“I did a semester abroad and I deliberately didn’t pick a country where it was illegal to be gay because I thought... that would be quite oppressive... Like as a result I looked at America and I picked [state] and one of the factors in picking that was that it was a more liberal state and I’d previously worked in [different state] where you can lose your job for being gay... and I just kind of didn’t want to put myself through that for a term... I was like not willing to risk going to prison for a semester abroad when there’s other places I can go... you don’t quite get the same freedom as other people”.

On the whole, the importance of (safe) space for many participants was clear. This could influence their use of commercial scenes and/or specific support groups, as well as their ‘choice’ of home, travel, work or study. Sometimes ‘decisions’ were limited or restricted, such as displays of public affection, whether they be determined by themselves or others. Within the desire for ‘space’, specific events were also highlighted as significant for supporting or facilitating ‘community’. Pride events were one such example, discussed below.

### **Pride events: partying with politics?**

Specific events that were seen as creating/aiding LGBT ‘space’ and/or ‘community’ were identified, with Pride events being the most obvious example. Clearly, Pride events meant different things to

different people, with the greatest contrast between those who saw Pride, essentially, as a 'party', and those who saw Pride more politically/as a 'protest'. It was the minority of participants in this study that argued that it could be both at the same time. Browne (2007: 82), based on research with lesbians in Brighton and Dublin, has suggested that Pride events are "parties with politics", identifying the pleasure, whilst also stressing that "Pride [is] a space in which to enact otherwise hidden identities [which] points to the presence of homophobia and heterosexism in everyday life". Broader 'tensions' between the need/desire for political activism versus social activities have also recently been explored in *Gay West*, a case study of the Bristol and Bath area, by Robert Howes (2011).

A number of participants highlighted the importance of Prides generally, even if there were aspects - such as the music - that did not appeal to their tastes:

"I am a big fan of community events, I think they have a big role to play in bringing people together, even if just once a year. When I lived in [city]... it was my first experience... there was always some trashy trance music playing, but it was still fun to go along and be part of that" (Andrea)

"I think Pride is very necessary, I would hate to see it go" (Dilys).

Fiona and Ben stressed that large Pride marches could facilitate a sense of community, and pride, which was particularly important for young people who may feel isolated at other times. Ben suggested it could "validate their identities" and provide a "positive realisation" that there is "a lot more of us and we come in all shapes and sizes, all different ages and ethnicities, and I think that's a good thing for young people, and for adults".

Gerry and Shourjo had attended their first Pride in 2011 to "support the broader community". As described earlier, this was significant given their historical 'disassociation' from other LGBT communities/people. Gerry now felt it was important to be 'counted' and seen, especially given the low(er) numbers of (South East) Asian people he saw when attending World Pride in 2012. He described World Pride as "brilliant", but at the same time recognised the low(er) representation of Asian people there, and would like to see images of Indians "...beyond forced marriages, arranged marriages or curry". Gerry had also felt some 'caution' at the potential for racism in Soho that night, as people became more drunk and "careless", though he described the atmosphere generally as "great". Similarly, Shourjo recalled feeling 'comfortable' and "excited" attending World Pride in London. He had also had a "great time" but would like to have seen more Asian and/or black people. They both felt that Pride events were important for "assisting one's wellbeing" through being 'part of something bigger' and creating a 'critical mass' which would not happen anywhere else. Shourjo also commented that to be 'accepted' and 'celebrated' is "fantastic", which he felt, in turn, boosts self-confidence and wellbeing.

It was the celebratory sense that had most appeal to some participants:

"I remember when my brother got married in India, I remember the whole family came together in celebration and joy and I remember thinking at that time I would never have this and the Pride is sort of a substitute because you can celebrate who you are and your relationships" (Shourjo)

"It's about celebration... at least in this country, it's a lot more kind of a party atmosphere and I think it's more of a celebration of the contribution of LGBT people" (Jodi).

For some, it was the 'safe space' or the lack of 'self-regulation' (discussed earlier) that was also key (see also Browne, 2007):

"The fact that we can mobilise a group of people, this mass of people into events like Pride... the fact that on the Friday night I wouldn't have felt comfortable walking down Regent Street with my partner, kissing and holding hands, whereas on the Saturday it was more than

acceptable and we relished every minute of it and nobody said a word... which means that I feel safe" (Timothy)

"I sometimes wonder to myself, do I have such ingrained habits that are actually really sad because if I go to a Pride I suddenly notice a change. That must mean that I have been inhibited although I didn't really... feel suppressed, repressed or whatever, but when there's a moment I can come out completely open, then there's a difference... there are some things I just don't do that we all recognise we... as gay or lesbians don't do" (Luce).

Some participants pointed to both positive and negative aspects of Pride. Carl, for instance, highlighted the celebration but also wondered if that led to a public perception that gay people are about "extremes":

"...loads of guys with their tops off, dancing in their little red pants, you know, those guys don't go to work like that" (Carl)

"The danger is that if it does become too much of a spectacle it becomes a freak show and then it doesn't become a celebration, it becomes a place for people to come and point and laugh because it does become too extreme and it does become too extravagant and then people start and look at it from the wrong angle" (Colin).

Shourjo voiced similar concerns, suggesting that visibility can be a 'two-edged sword', both helping to 'normalise' LGBT people in the public eye but also potentially linking public perceptions with 'men in hot pants'.

Dissatisfaction or unease with the 'commercialism' of Pride events was also emphasised by some:

"It's overtaken, like the commercial side of things and the money making side of things... they've turned it [Pride] more into sort of raping the pink pound rather than actually a sense of community and a sense of standing together, fighting against issues, trying to raise profiles, trying to raise awareness, trying to look into sort of establishing diversity and equality and acceptance and all the rest of it. That's all kind of fallen by the wayside" (Colin)

"I think there's nothing more horrendous than locking down Canal Street with a metal gate around it and paying 20 quid a day or whatever it is to get in. It's not that it's not political, there's just nothing. That's not even a celebration of diversity or culture. It's an exclusive party to make lots of money" (Matt)

"It is very money-minded, it's very corporate driven; it's not great" (Gemma).

Petra also felt that Prides were now very corporate and "far from their original purpose" but could also be "fantastic" fun, and provide safe public space. Helen specifically related how commercialism of Pride events could potentially exclude some groups, such as the homeless and/or young people:

"Actually look, here's all the people that that community is excluding because they can't afford it, because they can't drink, or they don't want to drink, or you know, we do have homeless people in our community. I don't think they're welcome at Pride" (Helen).

Some participants were clear that Pride, for them, was not about the 'party':

"For me Pride is definitely a protest. I can take or leave the party. It's nice, but I can go out any day and it's cheaper and there's less people, so that's definitely for me what it's about... trying to keep the marches political and ensure that again those messages around what's happening in the UK, what's happening abroad, what's happening in our asylum process are present in the parades" (Helen)

“I go for the parade and to like show unity and to support people... I’m not going for the piss up” (Nicky)

“From sort of a trade union point of view it absolutely drives me insane when people see Pride events as a big party because the Pride event itself is sort of a celebration of the history that you’ve come from, through, the LGBT community, and continues campaigning to change law, legislation, attitudes so that everybody is more inclusive and everybody feels more part of society” (Colin).

Some participants wanted Prides to become more political (again):

“I’m all for Pride events... I think there is a lot of people who would say we don’t need that anymore and I think that comes from not a very community minded perspective, if I’m going to be honest. I think it comes again with a little bit of privilege that ‘I don’t need it because I am able to pass quite well and that’s fine’, or ‘I have got the money to go wherever I want and live in a nice place so that’s fine for me too’. So I think again that’s about the hierarchies that exist within the LGBT community that unfortunately Pride has been sidelined as kind of a carry on and a chance to get pissed... I think the community needs to be put back into Pride... I would like to see politics get put back into Pride” (Gemma).

Taylor (2005, 2008) has examined similar themes in relation to decreasing emphasis on politics (and increasing ‘hedonism’) in (male-dominated) commercial scenes/spaces.

Without a political element or purpose, Pride events did not hold much appeal for some, with comparisons made to elements of the scene:

“I don’t particularly like Pride, I think it’s a load of men in hot pants getting pissed basically” (Fiona)

“It’s lost its sense of pride. It’s ridiculous, it’s called Pride, but it’s nothing to do with pride... it’s not about pride anymore, it is about piss up and it’s about a chance to pull and that’s what it is... Pride has changed into the scene, that’s all it is, like it’s merged into it” (Julie)

“I’m going to [city] next week but... I’m just going during the day, listening to some of the bands and then coming home on a night because I’m not really... like pills and all that shit, I’m not really into all that” (Nicky).

The emphasis on alcohol during Pride events was viewed as particularly problematic for Fiona and Ben, which they argued was not always good for young people. Laura also found Prides she had been to “a bit much” and “quite shocking”. The crowds, “virtually naked people”, and alcohol were not appealing, though she did still note “a great feeling of community”. She felt that whilst the word “hedonistic” is ‘value ridden’, she sees it as a true depiction of Prides:

“You’ve got to enjoy yourself but things can get really out of hand” (Laura).

A survey respondent also commented:

“I have attended local Pride events for over 10 years and have found that of late they have become less about equality and more about how much alcohol can be consumed. Whilst working on one of the stalls promoting marriage equality last year the main response from those who signed was that they didn’t really care about any of the LGBT issues regarding equality, all they really wanted was a badge/sticker” (Survey respondent 487: female lesbian aged 45-54).

Not everyone agreed that Pride events should have (more of) a political focus, however:

“I don’t necessarily think the political aspect of it would tie too many of the younger generation together like a massive party would... which isn’t really a bad thing, you know at the end of the day, surely the activism side of it, and the political side of it, the end result for that is for people to be able to be happy with who they are, whether society accepts that or not, so if the younger generation are just, you know, skipping a step out and just doing that already then that’s great” (Carl)

“There’s something which happens quite a lot... is the phrase ‘Pride is a protest’, which kind of pisses me off a bit because for some people Pride is a protest, but for lots of people now it’s really not” (Matt).

Petra suggested that Prides need not be political all the time, but that people may need to be “reminded” what they are celebrating. Andrea pointed out that attending specific events was not always necessary to feel pride in one’s identity:

“You don’t need to be at those events to be gay and proud. It was London Pride a few weeks ago and I was at a friend’s party in London and people were like, ‘are you not going to London Pride?’ and I said ‘no, I am going to be gay and proud with you, I don’t need to go and stand in a crowd full of strangers in Trafalgar Square’, so it’s important but you don’t have to have those events to be proud”.

Some participants said that Prides could be both ‘party’ and ‘protest’ at the same time:

“It happens in the same space which is kind of interesting, but I think a protest doesn’t have to be depressing and I think a lot of people associate it with that so they assume you can’t have fun” (Helen)

“The two can co-exist and you don’t have to chuck one overboard just because of the other” (Jodi).

Whilst there were differences of opinion about the emphases on commercial and/or political interests, the place of Prides in bringing together (potential) communities was clear. The creation of (temporary) safe spaces shared by LGBT people was thought to aid abandonment of routine self-surveillance and promote celebration of - and within - LGBT communities.

### **Online communities**

The place of ‘virtual’ communities in providing (safe) space for LGBT people to meet and/or interact was also identified during the course of the research, as was the ability to hear specific LGBT-related news from particular websites:

“You don’t have a news channel to tell you about LGBT rights or news, you just type in on [website] and you get all that information... if you didn’t have the internet then you wouldn’t have this community” (Julie).

Finding out information to support one’s identity and/or wellbeing was also highlighted as possible through the internet:

“When I was a teenager then yeah, I did use the internet, for what it was worth then, to try to again learn more, find out more, access more, but there wasn’t really a lot. All my stuff came from books and I think that’s really different now” (Gemma)

“For the online community for trans people it is predominantly a means of finding out information on medication” (Rachel).

A number of participants suggested the internet could facilitate ‘connections’ between LGBT people, particularly when much of their time might be spent with ‘straight people’ or in ‘straight places’:

“Communities on the internet definitely exist, you know, whether it’s a dating type community or whether it’s just a sort of friends type community, but there’s a huge number of them” (Tony)

“[Website] is how I chat to lots of my friends and lots of my friends are LGBT... I wouldn’t say that [website] is my LGBT community, but it’s a way to interact with my LGBT community” (Matt)

“Because of the politics I’m involved in... I tend to talk to people through the internet and arrange things and organise events through the internet” (Helen).

The value of web-based interactions in supporting people experiencing isolation was identified by some, particularly in relation to young people:

“For young LGBT people I’m sure it’s very important... I think that in terms of making a safe space for people to meet it’s really important, in terms of making a practical space for people to meet who might be quite geographically isolated” (Gemma).

Some participants imagined that they would have used the internet more as a young person, had it been available then, although they did not necessarily think ‘virtual communities’ were as ‘good’:

“We didn’t have that online community that people have these days but I can imagine that if we did that’s probably that I would have done, I probably would have come out online first maybe to people I didn’t particularly know just to kind of get some kind of support” (Carl)

“If I didn’t go to uni I would never have found any of this community stuff... god knows what I would have done. Probably focus on online stuff, maybe find some kind of community group, but it just wouldn’t be as good. Yeah, I would definitely think of the online stuff as a substitute” (Matt).

The use of online communication by LGBT young people has been identified elsewhere (e.g. see Hillier and Harrison, 2007; McDermott and Roen, 2012), though recent research has also identified internet use by LGB people in their older age (Knocker, 2012; Traies, 2012).

The importance of the internet for trans communities has been raised by Whittle (1998: 400), who stressed the impact that this “safe area” has had upon friendships, expertise sharing, and political activism. He commented, “cyberia has been a place where the trans community has been able to thrive, while the real world has often been a cold and unwelcoming place” (Whittle, 1998: 393). A number of participants in this study also stressed the importance of online forums within trans communities. Fiona, for example, felt that this had “allowed people to communicate and build communities [in areas] where it’s absolutely impossible to make any physical communities” (see also Whittle et al, 2007). Others also commented:

“I’m here because I feel although there is a so-called trans community the majority is online and it’s difficult to get people to come from behind their computers and deal with things in the real world... I don’t feel there is a community offline for trans people” (Rachel)

“The trans communities online are so important... maybe online worlds have provided safe spaces to try things out, safe spaces to meet others, and practical ways to meet others, and an international trans community has been able to mobilise in that way” (Gemma).

Some people thought greater access to information would enable more trans people to make decisions about their identities in ways that had not been as possible for older trans people. A survey respondent also said:

“The only reason I have any idea how to transition on the NHS is because of trans\* communities” (Survey respondent 382: panromantic demisexual male, of trans experience aged 18-24).

A number of people expressed some concerns about online activities, for example the possibility of using online networking sites to target people for hate crime. Others thought particular sites may perpetuate “stereotypes” (e.g. about body image or sexual practices) that could deter people from coming out. Participants were also sceptical about the benefits of being ‘active’ online:

“I think it’s limiting personally. I know it’s a judgement... I don’t have any profiles online myself. I went through a phase of it, and for me, I didn’t enjoy a high quality of life... I found it a drain of my energy... I spent so many hours wasting time... actually since stopping I’ve had so much time on my hands” (Huw).

Some stressed that whilst the internet might have provided ‘gains’, it could also have other consequences:

“While the internet means there is greater support for a wider range of people, online forums means the community feels much looser than it may have done in the past” (Survey respondent 265: female lesbian aged 25-34).

Some young people stressed that they were only ever told the ‘dangers’ online and not the potentially positive side, particularly for isolated LGBT young people:

“We don’t get told the good stuff... you don’t get told this person met this person and it’s happy ever after” (Kerry)

“It’s just as easy to get thrown in a ditch if you meet them in person” (Jason).

Nevertheless, it was recognised that virtual communications could connect people, and some people did meet partners that way. To summarise, online forums and other websites were thought to support LGBT communities in two key ways: by increasing access to appropriate news and information, and by facilitating connections between LGBT people, particularly for those who might be less physically connected. The importance of safety and other emerging themes were linked to what might be called ‘wellbeing’, to which the next section turns.

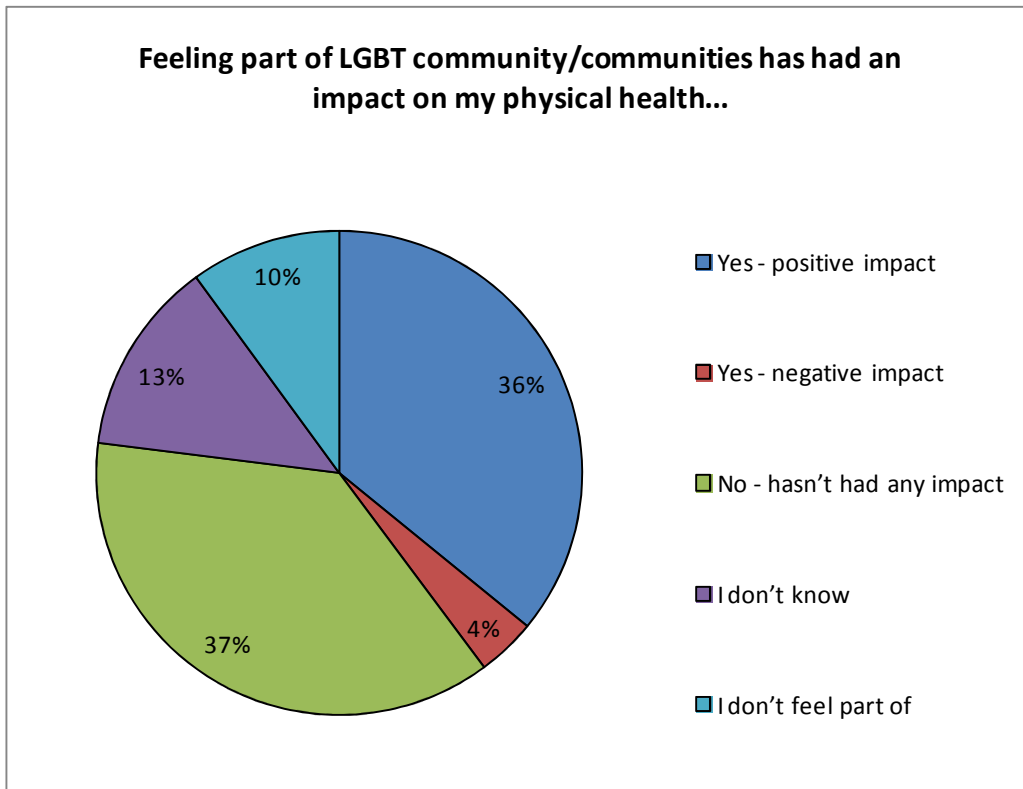
### **Wellbeing and support**

In order to look at the impact of experiences of LGBT communities, the survey asked people to say whether they thought feeling part of one or more such communities had had an impact on their physical health, emotional wellbeing/mental health and ‘quality of life’<sup>3</sup>. Chart 3 below suggests that LGBT communities do not have a clear impact on physical health. Just slightly more people felt there had been no impact (37%) compared to those that felt there had been positive impact (36%). By contrast, the perceived impact on emotional health and ‘quality of life’ was far clearer (Charts 4 and 5 below).

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<sup>3</sup> This term was used as it is particularly highlighted within the AHRC’s ‘Connected Communities’ programme of work. It was deliberately not defined but left open to respondents’ interpretation.

Chart 3: Community impact on physical health



Charts 4 and 5 indicate that the clear majority (just under three-quarters) felt that LGBT communities had had a positive impact on their emotional wellbeing/mental health and general 'quality of life'.

Chart 4: Community impact on emotional wellbeing and mental health

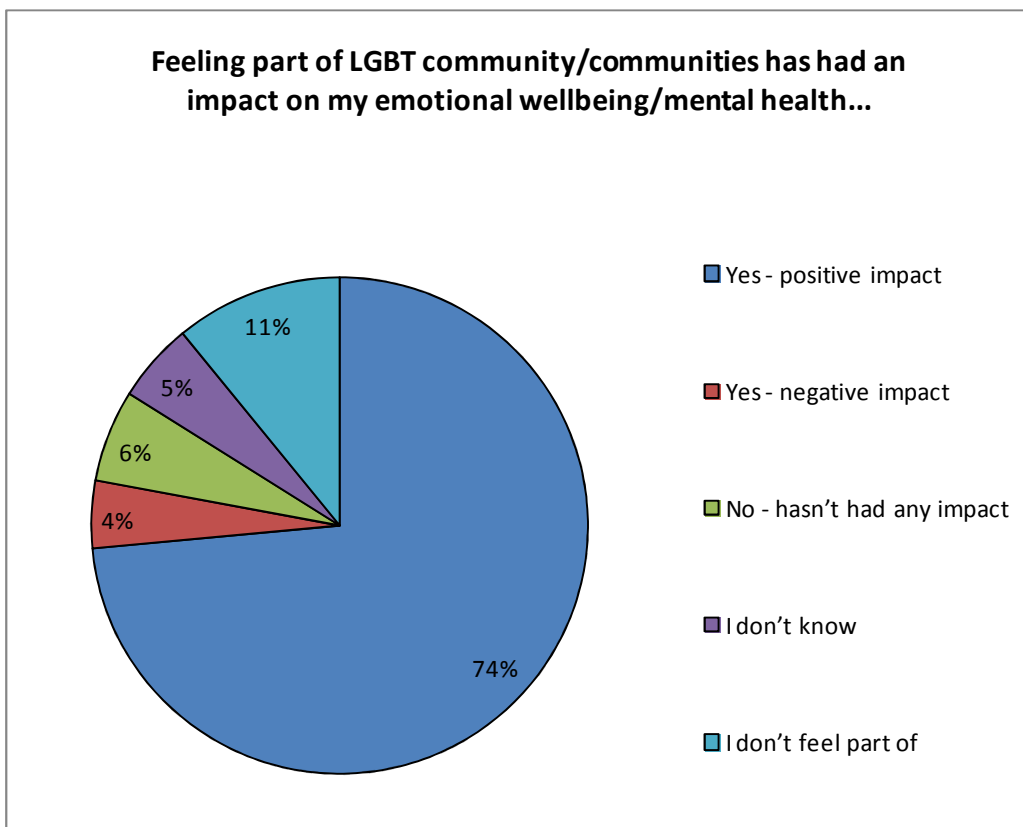
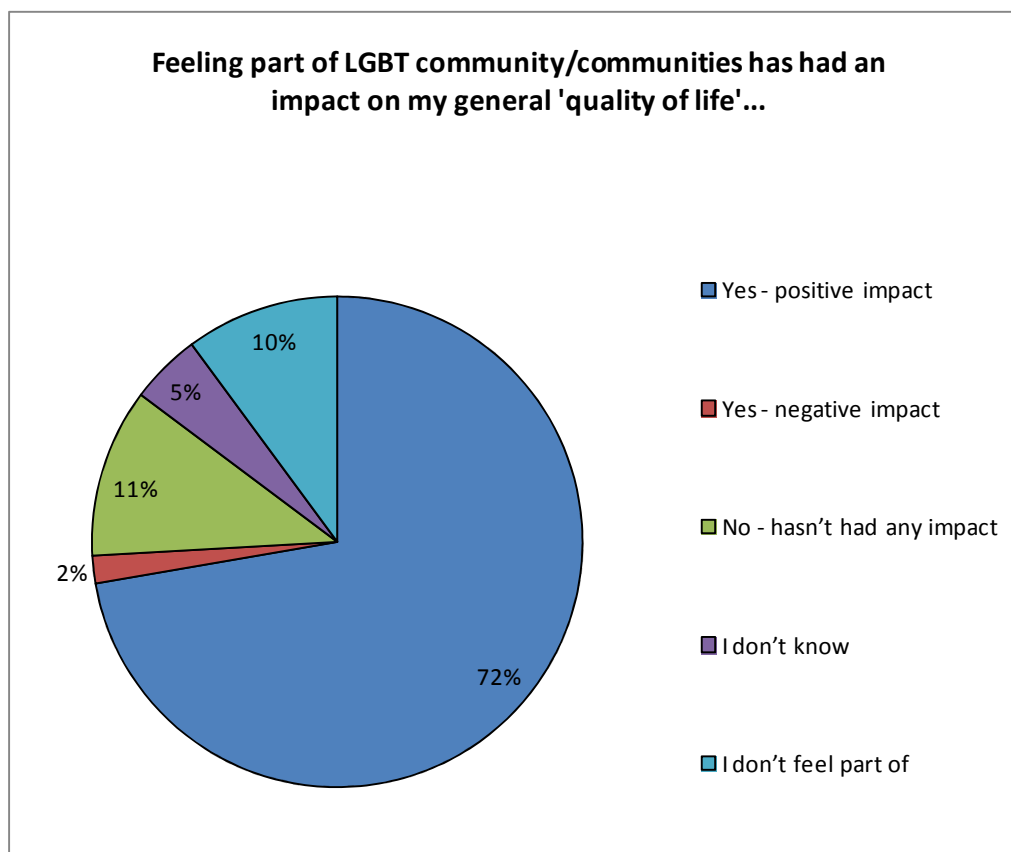




Chart 5: Community impact on 'quality of life'



Participants involved in the in-depth aspects of the research emphasised the potential impact of feeling part of a community or network of LGBT people in terms of health or wellbeing. Often this was in relation to the benefits of developing friendships, whether through physical LGBT groups or online:

“In terms of wellbeing, I have been involved with some sort of group most of my adult life and it would have been a lot poorer without it, so overall it is a huge benefit for wellbeing I think... people have got someone to talk to, friends” (Peter)

“The healthy bit is the coming together and having fun because nothing, for all the therapy and anti-depressants in the world, nothing will cheer you up more as a young miserable gay man than having more gay friends to laugh about stupid gay things and to talk about boys [with]” (Matt)

“It has been particularly important as a lesbian to have a community of women and the sense of connection and support that brings contributes greatly to the quality of my life: body, mind and spirit” (Survey respondent 51: female lesbian aged 55-64).

Existing research (Pugh, 2002) has also identified that being or feeling part of a community can be positive in terms of social support for health and wellbeing or ‘quality of life’, particularly in older age.

Some people identified the value of connections and/or friendships for confidence or self-esteem:

“My confidence has been helped greatly by meeting online people like myself” (Rachel)

“Identifying as gay has not been accepted well by my family... Social support, acceptance in other circles, and finding others to identify with has been important for me to feel confident and that I am ‘ok’/normal” (Survey respondent 447: “gay and/or lesbian (I identify with neither word less or more than the other)” female aged 25-34)

“And the beauty of it [attending a group]... is because it indirectly raises your self-esteem and how proud you are. So this type of community, it does so many... positive things” (Julie).

When talking about attending an LGB youth group, Jason explained: “I don’t get it [self-esteem] anywhere else”. He attributed feeling confident enough to attend Pride events to his belonging to the group. Similarly, Weeks et al (2001: 189) pointed to the self-confidence that comes with “close non-heterosexual friends and sympathetic others”. Ellis (2007b) has also emphasised the role of community in (re)affirming a positive sense of self through providing physical or metaphorical space to be oneself. Combating potential ‘isolation’ was also a factor raised by some participants (see also Cant, 2004):

“Joining LGBT [group] helped my personal wellbeing as felt less isolated” (Jackie)

“Feeling part of any community is likely to positively affect mental health, whereas a lack of community and isolation tends to negatively affect this” (Survey respondent 447: “gay and/or lesbian (I identify with neither word less or more than the other)” female aged 25-34)

“I live a very ‘straight’ life but nice to talk with LGBT people” (Philippa).

Illustrations of impact on physical health were also provided:

“In terms of physical health, I have taken part in social sporting activities with lesbian groups - country walks, walking holidays, 5-a-side football tournaments, sponsored charity fun runs, race for life. Being part of the group has made it a lot easier to participate in these activities” (Survey respondent 513: female lesbian aged 35-44).

It was often hard to disentangle ‘community’ and/or wider social influences on wellbeing. Petra, for example, commented that meeting people with “common identities and experiences” is positive, in order to be able to access support, establish networks, and make friends. She also felt that more supportive environments (both within and without LGBT communities) positively impacted upon wellbeing. She felt that she now attracted less “stares” than she did previously, which she linked to a changing “culture” and social attitudes, linked in turn to positive legislative developments. Similarly, she felt that gay clubs had become more welcoming of trans people over the years, with greater trans visibility now.

The importance of visibility was also highlighted by Gemma, who argued:

“Being able, I think, to be able to see yourself in the world around you is really important for anybody at all, but especially I think for people who identify with some kind of marginal identity. I think that sometimes you don’t know who you are or what you want to do until you see it somewhere else... to have validation that the way you see the world is shared by other people... of course we all need this”.

Valentine and Skelton (2003) argue that as young people seek to express, validate and/or support their identities, accessing the scene can operate as an important marker of transition to adulthood.

Some participants talked about friendships becoming akin to family, supporting previous work by Weeks et al (2001) and Jones-Wild (2012) amongst others:

“You’ve got different levels... ultimately when you get something like this [group] it goes beyond community and it does become family” (Colin).

Recent research among older lesbians by Traies (2012) has also identified evidence of ‘families of choice’ (Weeks et al, 2001). One participant in this study illustrated this concept by discussing the place of Christmas in ‘family’ life:

“I think if you’ve moved away from home or you’ve been kicked out of home, it does help you rebuild your life. I think a lot of people are closer than other friendship groups... I mean I know friends and they have ‘gay Christmas’ because they can’t go home, or at least some of their friends can’t go home so they do something to really support each other in that way. So there is something in that bond that’s perhaps needed to be a little bit stronger than with other family or with other groups of friends because of family difficulties... it was much more than a ‘house Christmas’” (Helen).

It should be noted, however, that these experiences of ‘distance’ from families of ‘origin’ or ‘fate’ will not apply evenly across differing cultural groups (Yip, 2008). See also Pahl and Spencer (2004), who prefer the term ‘personal communities’, for a broader critique of ‘families of choice’.

LGBT groups or networks were suggested as being particularly important whilst coming out:

“For me a significant thing for community has been the group here at work. So that has made a difference to me because I was not out... I just feel easier in myself now... a few years ago... the stress levels that are associated with doing your job and also trying to put this strange front in there was becoming, you know, a bit much... within work [this group]... helped me get through that period” (Jackie)

“I find the existence of LGBT communities very valuable, especially when I was in the early stages of coming out - knowing that there were other people who were “like me” and happy and confident about this was immeasurably helpful” (Survey respondent 380: gay cisgendered male aged 25-34)

“I think when I first came out like finding a place where you kind of belong, if that makes sense, is really important... like having a support network, having people who’ve gone through the same thing, the stuff from the time when you’re coming out to family that can be really difficult, so there’s a sort of shared support there” (Helen).

Linked to this, other people stressed the benefits of being ‘out’ for strengthening their wellbeing and/or their ability to build and maintain friendships. Ruth, for example, identified the “strain” on one’s mental health when “hiding” one’s sexuality; since coming out she felt she was able to be “the same person” everywhere and relished not having “separate lives”. She had found “deceiving” people very “distressing” because she felt she was “naturally” an “honest” person. The strains of long-term “guardedness” (Weeks et al, 2001: 67), secrecy and fear have also been illustrated elsewhere (Howes, 2011; Johnston and Valentine, 1995). By contrast, Ruth now said that her ability to “tap into” a (lesbian and gay) network was the envy of her straight single (older female) friends who had no such comparative network. Carl also felt that being ‘in the closet’ can prevent “decent relationships” within and without employment.

A degree of self-surveillance was evident among participants, as was their relief at not having to:

“I spent the first 30 years of my life avoiding chat about my emotions, desires etc for fear of outing myself. People used to compliment me on being such a good listener; in truth I was just a silenced talker. Since coming out I haven’t shut up about what I feel” (Website contribution)

“[This group] is a more comfortable environment where you’re not having to second guess people’s thoughts... you encounter people and you don’t know sort of what their feelings are towards sexuality... it’s a continuing process; anyone you meet” (Adam).

Such self-surveillance meant that coming/being ‘out’ was not the either/or status it is sometimes assumed to be, but an ongoing process of ‘identity management’ (Formby, 2012).

Whilst implicit in some of the above extracts, a number of participants also discussed mutual support more explicitly, such as around information sharing:

“I am a gay single parent living in a heterosexual environment. I have health issues which are not met by usual pathways and I would not discuss with my GP! I turn to the LGBT community for support, advice and help” (Survey respondent 188: gay male aged 45-54)

“I have found many interesting facts [online] which have helped my transition, facts that I pass on to others to help them” (Rachel).

Some people expressed this as a “duty” to support or “defend” others within their community. This support could be through voluntary work, for example, or through supporting friends and other (LGBT) people more informally (see also Barker et al, 2012; Hines, 2007; Ryrie et al, 2010; Weeks et al, 2001):

“If I can help people because I’m in a different situation to them but I get what it’s like to be gay and I get how hard that is then surely I should be able to support people... if you don’t [‘defend’ each other] then no-one else is gonna do it” (Carl).

The potential impact on wellbeing from LGBT communities was often stressed in terms of networks or groups enabling friendships and (alternative) family formations, which in turn were said to facilitate the exchange of information and/or mutual support, which in turn was said to help create and maintain individual wellbeing. There were, however, factors also connected with LGBT communities that were identified as causing potential ‘harm’ to wellbeing, as explored below.

### **Potential ‘dangers’ for wellbeing**

A number of participants identified potential “dangers” linked to LGBT communities that could harm individual wellbeing. Primarily these revolved around drug and alcohol consumption on the scene, though other issues were also raised, and some people linked a number of issues together:

“I think we know that within the adult population there are high amounts of drug and alcohol misuse and part of the gay male culture can be around promiscuity, and for females as well, so in terms of young people accessing LGBT support networks that are adult focussed there can be a danger of it not being the healthiest” (Liz).

Several participants talked about the availability of drugs on the scene:

“When I was a teenager I was entwined with the scene, being out and doing whatever, it wasn’t exactly the best environment, it didn’t have a massive positive effect on me, there are a lot of drugs on the scene... The drug culture is massive” (Julie).

Research in this area suggests higher levels of drug use by LGBT people than among heterosexual people (Buffin et al, 2012; Guasp, 2012; Hunt and Fish, 2008; Rooney, 2012), although this may at least be partly a result of scene-based recruitment of research participants (McManus, 2003). Drug use has been linked, for example, to lesbians and gay men wanting to ‘separate’ themselves from the heterosexual environment of their everyday lives (Valentine and Skelton, 2003). Keogh et al (2009) identified the influence of broader ‘social norms’ on the scene, as well as men’s desire to escape stress, loneliness or unhappiness, and lessen social or sexual unease. Cant (2004) also discussed the links between smoking and the scene.

Other people emphasised the dominance of alcohol within LGBT socialising:

“I’d say the downside in a way is that it’s so linked with drinking and if you don’t drink you’re excluded... And also alcohol and stuff are depressants; they’re not the best thing to be having lots of when you’re doing that. At the same time that’s probably why it is so linked with drinking, if it’s a really easy way to cope” (Helen)

“There’s a balance between creating a space where people can enjoy themselves and have a good time and creating a space where people either have a shit night out because they haven’t found the man of their dreams or woman of their dreams or get really pissed and take loads of drugs which isn’t exactly good for you” (Matt).

Petra highlighted the number of clubs in London open 24 hours a day over the weekend, which she felt could lead to unsafe sex. For her, this was the “hedonistic” or “hard core” element of LGBT communities, historically linked to “marginalisation” which meant gay men in particular learnt to “party hard”. As Carl also argued:

“That’s also why gay men have a reputation for being, you know, slags I suppose, it’s because... if you repressed something for so long and then something’s available and you’re introduced to gay bars and gay clubs, you know of course you are... you don’t not give a kid sweets for a week and then take them to a sweet shop”.

Issues related to sexual health were highlighted by a number of participants:

“In terms of sexual health, not to be stereotypical but I know a lot of gay guys have picked up sexually transmitted diseases throughout their promiscuity in the LGBT community” (Julie).

Possible isolation was also identified, with the potential for “cliques” to discriminate against some people and/or direct them towards ‘unhealthy’ practices. Cant (2008) also suggested that exclusionary practices on the scene can be detrimental to emotional wellbeing.

“There is so much racism, fatphobia, biphobia and hate towards people who follow a religion in various LGBT communities. I don’t feel like I belong anywhere, and I won’t unless I magically become a white, thin lesbian who’s an atheist” (Survey respondent 535: “mostly female” bisexual aged 35-44)

“LGB communities have had a negative effect on my life, due to transphobia” (Survey respondent 382: panromantic demisexual male, of trans experience aged 18-24)

“Some of the worst bullying I have experienced/seen was within the community. Part of the reason I am involved is because of wanting to feel connected and some people made this difficult” (Survey respondent 159: gay male aged 18-24)

Despite his negative experiences, the above participant nevertheless suggested:

“Equally, I probably would be worse off emotionally if I hadn’t joined [the community] and felt isolated, I spent my school years feeling isolated and that was much worse” (Survey respondent 159: gay male aged 18-24).

Broader issues were also identified about the scene and how (un)welcoming it may be, with implications for wellbeing when the scene is often understood as the most accessible and/or identifiable form of ‘LGBT community’. Some participants felt that (scene-based) LGBT communities “reinforce stereotypes” and “keep [the] LGBT ghetto going”.

“[For some people] expectations placed on them by the gay scene are a barrier to them identifying as LGBT; that you have to go on the scene or that you have to be a queenie or you have to be promiscuous... that’s the danger of community, that it becomes dictatorial in that sense” (Gemma)

Some of the ‘pressures’ identified in this study can be linked to debates about ‘homonormativity’ (Duggan, 2002), the concept of dominant social norms among lesbians and gay men which induce conformity to particular (consumerist and/or individualist) values and practices (Browne and Bakshi, 2011). More generally, some participants identified (issues with) not conforming to ‘stereotypical’ or ‘normative’ behaviour:

“It’s important to recognise that that sense of shared identity only extends so far... we do not have to buy into stereotypes if we do not wish to. For example, in my University days in the late 90s, I felt very disconnected from my LGB Society, as the focus there was on being trendy and fashionable and listening to pop music. I was interested in science fiction and role-playing and didn’t give two hoots about fashion, and was therefore judged to be “not properly gay”... There is a great deal that is good about belonging to the LGBT community, but the tendencies for heterophobia and oppressive self-stereotyping within our community are very real challenges that must be overcome” (Survey respondent 380: gay cisgendered male aged 25-34)

“I find the normative pressures from the gay scene over appearance, behaviour, taste in music, attitudes towards age etc etc far more oppressive than anything I’ve experienced within my non-gay social network... My preferred social activities (sci fi, computer games and geek stuff) are not typical of behaviours encouraged by the gay scene” (Survey respondent 179: gay man aged 45-54).

Valentine and Skelton (2003) argued that the scene operates as a paradoxical space because it can provide both support and validation to young people, at the same time as posing ‘risks’ in terms of potential for exclusion, unsafe sex and/or drug use. Simpson (2012b) has similarly pointed to the scene as place of self-expression and ‘play’, as well as potential exclusion or oppression. A survey participant similarly commented:

“I think LGBT communities have had positive AND negative impacts on my life. Certain aspects are quite destructive - pressure to conform to certain body types and the obsession with gratuitous sex. Other aspects (community groups when people come together with a shared interest or hobby) are really important to build connections and a support network” (Survey respondent 585: gay male aged 25-34).

To summarise, participants identified a range of issues that they felt had the potential to harm wellbeing, particularly around alcohol, drug use and lack of safer sex practices on the scene (see also Ellis, 2007b; Valentine and Skelton, 2003). However, it should be stressed that, as with community, ‘the scene’ should not be viewed as a homogenous entity, as even within this research participants held differing opinions about what constituted a (commercial) ‘scene’. Nevertheless, potential pressures associated with this understanding of a particular community were identified, and do have implications for current and future wellbeing.

## Chapter 6: Aspirations for the future

This chapter looks to the future, drawing on in-depth and website extracts, as well as existing literature. It identifies four subthemes relating to 'acceptance'; legislation; service provision and 'space', and issues for young people.



### 'Acceptance' or 'utopia'?

In thinking about current communities, participants were also asked to think about their aspirations for the future, and what that might mean for LGBT communities. Some people raised the idea of (visible) 'acceptance':

"When all other communities - whether social, religious, national, ethnic, or whatever - are fully accepting of our community/sexuality/identity, then we can relax, be open and accepting of ourselves" (Website contribution).

Related to 'acceptance', being able to show physical affection in public was again raised as important:

"I think foremost I want to have the right to be as I am and to meet with those I want to without fear of any form of reprisal or encounters that will suggest my choices are lesser, deviant or shameful in some way. I appreciate the fight for 'marriage' but more than this I want to be able to walk down the street holding my partner's hand without feeling this is a brave act or something that marks me out as 'different' (Website contribution)

"I know what you mean about walking down the street holding your partner's hand. To me it's the most important barometer of social acceptance. Even in London or Manchester it's rare to see this going on outside a few choice streets (Website reply to above post)

"I fear it's too late for me, I would never feel comfortable walking down a street holding my partner's hand. I have missed out on so much of my life by having to hide a big part of myself during my formative years... hopefully LGB&T people will not have to hide in the future" (Website reply to above posts).

Others felt that communities of the future would be different and that LGBT communities would not be 'needed' in the same way. Ruth, for example, thought that communities need to have a purpose or reason for existing, which may lessen in the future. Matt struggled to imagine a future without a scene, but at the same time was not sure whether it would be 'needed':

"Gay people have created... a form of culture based on bars and clubs and so maybe it's quite difficult to see what's going to happen because there's no other culture which has had that formation of their community, so I can't imagine what those bars and clubs would be like because there's nothing to compare it to... There's no alternative to what we've got at the moment... Even if... all our needs were met, what the hell would we do? Where would we go? ...I just honestly can't think of what it would be like... I know the benefit it's given me, I would kind of mourn the loss of that community, but I wouldn't need that benefit if I was in a better situation to start off with, so I can't mourn something I don't need".

In thinking about the future, Peter wondered to what extent physical and/or online spaces would feature within 'community':

"I think there is a great divide and it will be interesting to see what happens... my generation where the online thing came after you had formed your experiences, it's something you do but it's not something I naturally take to, but for people who have grown up with it I think it's their first port of call and the question is whether they will want to go to physical community groups or if their whole lives will be spent on the online environment".

In one group discussion participants identified wanting more "unity" and 'inclusivity' within LGBT communities of the future. Fiona and Ben also wished for more "options" or "debate" about ways to "do your gender", which would include more varied language and 'spaces'.

A number of participants talked about a "utopia" or "dream world" of the future where particular gender or sexual identities would no longer 'matter':

"My utopia would be that people weren't obsessed with gender and then we wouldn't have these problems... [so] who you fall in love with ceases to matter... that's a long way off reality [but] that would be my goal though" (Helen)

"I think in fifty years time, I don't want to feel special coz' I'm gay" (Shourjo).

Fiona and Ben also wanted to see a day when gender and sexuality are not made to "count", or are not "policed" or "penalised". Similarly, Petra wished that in the future there would be no need to recognise or self-identify genders or sexualities. In this sense, there would also be no specific 'LGBT' communities:

"I actually like the idea of living in a little market town where I know my neighbours know and we're OK. That, to me, is being part of the community and ultimately that's got to be the overall goal. We don't need an LGBT community because we are the community" (Timothy)

"We shouldn't need or want to have individual communities... I'd say I want to be an individual within a society that cares. One society that has respect for whatever that individual wants, needs or chooses to be, or happens to be born" (Jackie).

Not everyone shared this vision, however, whether they related that to their own personal needs, or wider society:

"Do we ask people to leave their ethnic identity behind? No, we don't want them to do that. That's wrong and so I don't want to leave my identity behind either because it's been a source of empowerment for me and it's formed much of my other politics which have nothing to do with gender or sexuality but they have to do with fairness" (Gemma)

"When a group of straight blokes can be in a club and see two blokes getting off with each other and it's not an issue, there won't be the need for gay bars and gay clubs as much... I can't imagine there ever being a point in time where everyone is perfect and everyone hasn't got an issue with someone being different and I think for as long as it's like that people are always gonna feel the need to group themselves together with people that are the same as them" (Carl).

Concepts of visibility and acceptance in broader society clearly impacted upon perceptions of future LGBT community needs. The extent to which people could imagine future lives varied, but in doing so some talked about the need for legislative and wider social change, discussed below.



### **Moving forward with or without legislation**

Some participants raised particular social changes they would like to see. For some, this concerned legislation, with advantages and disadvantages to 'gay marriage' often featuring. Concerns about so-called 'corrective rape' of women internationally and in Britain were also raised. For many, there was a sense of "battles to be won", with employment opportunities for trans people being one such example (see also Whittle et al, 2007).

Not all participants saw legislation as the (only) answer, and raised issues about broader social attitudes:

"Just because I bring in a piece of legislation midnight tonight doesn't mean people wake up with different hearts and minds tomorrow. Community is what influences hearts and minds, not legislation... having that community visible keeps us in a position where we are influencing hearts and minds of ourselves, and also of wider society" (Gemma).

Ben was also critical of some legislation, and a wider "politics of assimilation", which he did not think would lead to greater social or structural equality.

One group did not want LGBT people to "settle" for less than they should, and become apathetic or complacent. They argued that 'less obvious' oppression was still oppression, citing teacher disinterest and lack of confidence in (supporting) sexuality as an example, suggesting that whilst Section 28 may have gone, experiences for some young people may not have markedly improved. These fears about complacency in the light of improvements to gay legal and/or social rights are not unique, and have been documented during the 1970s (Howes, 2011).

In thinking about whether or not legislation could help to improve certain social attitudes, some people raised issues about future language use, with implications for how to talk, and think, about LGBT people:

"I think what's really important is that we get rid of this idea of who LGBT people are and we understand it as a part of an identity and not the whole thing because I think you often have disabled people, LGBT people, people of colour or black people and as a result black people can't be LGBT people, disabled people can't be... So we really need to break down these ideas in order to kind of move beyond it" (Helen).

Some participants argued for a more inclusive language, to use more gender-neutral pronouns, and to talk about biphobic and transphobic as well as homophobic bullying.

One aspect of language which was returned to was the use of 'labels'. It was suggested that if people do not want gender or sexuality to 'matter' in the future (as above), then that means individuals giving up their own identity labels, which for some was problematic:

"It's a catch 22 because we would have to all walk in here tomorrow and give up all of our labels for society to stop labelling us, but actually I don't want to give mine up because it's a really big part of me" (Gemma)

"How do you know who you are... part of labels is about being able to define yourself and if you don't have anything to define yourself as, then who am I?" (Ben).

### **Service provision and alternative spaces**

Whilst language was identified as important for those within and without LGBT communities, service provision and alternative physical spaces were also seen as significant for future communities. One practitioner, for example, argued that funders often want improvements to mainstream services to include LGBT people, but that in her experience service users often want specific LGBT services so

they do not have to explain their gender and/or sexual identities (see also Cant, 2008; Formby, 2011b). Others also identified the need for:

“...facilities for older generation LGBT, it isn’t all about youth services” (Eva)

“...rural services to improve, but again these are like pie in the sky really and if LGBT people continue to move to cities... it’s a shame that people feel they can’t stay where they were born if they want to” (Gemma).

Need for improvements to the scene were identified by Gerry who would like more gay-owned businesses but also more opportunities for “gay consumption” in the ‘mainstream’:

“Why do we put up with so much shit, why do we put up with so much crap? In towns and cities across the country, in towns in particular, you know, where there might only be one pub, you know, why does it have to be that bad, why does the music have to be that bad, it’s so disappointing” (Gerry).

Gemma also said:

“I would like the [city] scene to not be dominated by one company because I think they are not community minded... I think it’s been very detrimental to the [city] community... people don’t realise they’re being used. They don’t care about you. So I’d like for [city] to be able to get out from under what I consider is a yoke of that”.

It was clear that not everyone wanted to (only) go out on the scene:

“Things will be fine and great when I can walk into **any** place and my partner doesn’t get harassed and I don’t get some muppet trying to pick a fight with me because he thinks I want his girlfriend” (Jodi, emphasis added)

“I would like to go to a **normal** pub, but due to stupid things like using the facilities, in many cases that dictates where you go, for example a lot of young trans people I speak to are terrified of using the correct facilities and use the wrong ones, or usually the disabled. I couldn’t go in not knowing it was a trans-friendly place” (Rachel, emphasis added).

Casey (2007: 135) argued that “the decline of ‘cost free’ community spaces are reducing access to non-commercial sites, reflecting the very real and lived exclusions being placed upon those undesired by the commercial scene”. Within the present study, much feedback about space in the future also related to the desire for more non-scene LGBT spaces:

“What I think we need is more non-commercial spaces... I think to be truly healthy that’s what we need more of... for just these kind of friendly moments... a kind of non-commercial, non-alcoholic, daytime sort of space” (Matt)

“A lot of the community don’t have places to go. People who don’t have a lot of money, people who don’t feel able to access the gay scene because they don’t fit the bill don’t have somewhere to go... it would be nice just to have a community space... something that wasn’t money driven and something that wasn’t all about alcohol and clubbing” (Gemma).

Laura wanted more women’s groups or (non-scene) spaces where she would feel ‘safer’, whilst Liz wanted LGBT communities to become:

“...bigger and stronger and have more of a family focus... It would be nice if in the LGBT aspect there was a part for people who had children” (Liz).

Ben also wanted Pride spaces to become (more) political and not just one day events, but “whole cultural weekends with debates and book reviews”.

It was clear that when trying to think about an (improved) future, community spaces were still important, but some people clearly wanted these to be focussed away from the commercial scene. This of course raises the question of how to fund and support non-commercial ventures.

### **Education and support for young people**

When thinking about the future, some people highlighted the need for 'education', for example to eradicate stereotypes about LGBT people. This could clearly come from within and without LGBT communities. Others specifically talked about improving provision and inclusion within schools:

"I would change the education system that is completely wrong, they are scared what parents are going to say" (Julie).

More people talked about support for young people in general:

"One of the things that causes mental health problems within the LGBT communities is that sense of isolation and not feeling supported, families not responding well. My experience is that once the young people get the validation and the sense that they are not the only ones and they are fine once families are brought on board" (Liz).

Petra highlighted the importance of support groups "making the various narratives available to young trans people, helping them make sense of their lives", contrasting this with her own experience when she was younger (see also Hines, 2010). Rachel raised concerns about who is able to access trans support services, however:

"Many, especially young, trans men and women are angry and end up in crime due to lack of support, which in many cases is not offered by support groups because they don't fit that group's definition of what being trans is" (Rachel).

Members of an LGB youth group felt that support groups would not be necessary in an ideal future, but until that day, there should be specialist support and provision available everywhere.

Whilst participants were aware that many of their dreams for the future could be 'unrealistic', it was interesting to see whether and how much the concept of 'community' was integral to this thinking. There was contrasting emphasis on 'acceptance', inclusion and 'support', compared to those that sought to move beyond these 'needs'. What did seem clear was the ongoing importance of identity and space, however these were conceptualised.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

This report has examined understandings and experiences of 'LGBT communities'. The intention is not to generalise, but to identify some of the key issues that could be considered further in future practice and/or research. The conclusion will therefore bring together some of the key themes connected to people's understandings and experiences, and point to implications for using the terms 'community' or 'communities'.

Three key elements, or foundations, to community have been highlighted, supporting previous literature (Homfray, 2007; Weeks, 1996): place/space, (shared) identity and (to a lesser extent) politics. 'Space' formed an important part of understandings and experiences of community. The commercial scene in particular featured prominently in the data. Whether or not people engaged with this space, it operated as an important visible - and to a certain extent symbolic - sight of safety, connection and/or identity 'validation'. Whilst communities for some could be 'imaginary', for others the scene and other geographical spaces took on legendary status which did not feature in lived experience of unequal access. This could relate to geographical location, or barriers linked to personal circumstances such as age, (dis)ability, dress, ethnicity, finances, gender, and a range of other factors identified. The scene was further complicated by offering both potential affirmation and safety, at the same time as posing perceived 'dangers' to individual or collective wellbeing.

An important aspect to community was conceptualised as an (often intangible) feeling of 'connection' or shared experience related to identity, for example of 'coming out' and/or facing prejudice or discrimination. For some this connection was more clearly linked to involvement in LGBT-related activism, politics or volunteering. The place of friendships in community is implicit but nonetheless important here. However, for the most part communities were talked about in broader terms than 'just' friendship, most clearly in a sense of (wanting to) share space with, and feel connected to, other LGBT people with whom there may be no personal ties - a sense of solidarity beyond known relationships - what could be called 'communities of choice' (Homfray, 2007). There was often a subtle difference between *a* community (if not *the* community) and *my* community (for which one can read network of friends and sometimes family or geographical area). A (causal) relationship between these two communities was often hard to disentangle, but could perhaps be expressed as 'communities within communities'. This relationship might involve local or personal friendship communities contributing to and helping form broader LGBT communities, whether these are spatially or more conceptually understood. Homfray (2007: 170-171) has also suggested such linkages and networks contribute to an overall 'connected' community: "the image of a network where groups and individuals may be linked by common points of contact or shared issues of interest is a helpful way of understanding how the idea of community can be used to describe people with shared characteristics who may not all directly interact, but who have links with one another forming something of a spider's web of connectivity".

Though overall there was a reported sense of solidarity among LGBT people, many participants stressed that this did not equate to similarity, highlighting varying experiences and needs within LGBT communities. This was often coupled with a strong desire to challenge existing assumptions, whilst at the same time maintaining belief in a 'community of interest' where 'like-mindedness' could be felt and shared. Again there was often a subtle difference about who was bestowing community status; if this was from within LGBT communities then 'difference' was more likely to be overlooked than if community status was being bestowed externally. In other words, there was a sense that the language of community needs to be 'by us not about us'.

Across many of the issues discussed above, the perceived need for (escaping) 'self-censorship' in wider society was implicated as key to why people engage with communities, whether these be spatial, groups of particular friends, or merely the idea of a 'connection' - an 'imagined community' where one would not need to 'edit' oneself. I would suggest that one of the key reasons it was hard for some people to imagine a future without the commercial scene (see Chapter 6), is because it was hard for them to imagine a different social context than the one they currently live in, a social context that many participants felt they needed or wanted to retreat from in order to 'relax' or feel 'comfortable', even if only occasionally. This research indicates the strength of self-censorship

amongst LGBT communities, which links to the very concept of (desiring) 'community' itself. To return to Weeks' argument (1996: 83), "the idea of a sexual community may be a fiction, but it is a necessary fiction".

It could be argued that, with many caveats and nuances, the phrases 'LGBT community' and 'LGBT communities' have some validity because (some) LGBT people choose to use them, and in doing so give the terms (some) meaning, albeit meanings that are not always shared. Particular caution is needed, however, when the terms are used by people who may have less understanding and believe that there is one singular community and/or that LGBT people are more alike than not. The concept of community can pose both potential benefits in terms of a suggestion of affirmation and safety, at the same time as posing potential 'dangers' through perpetuating misconceptions or stereotypes about LGBT people, which were very real concerns for some participants. Policy and practice that draws on the concept of community in the future should attempt to acknowledge the diversity, inequality and power dynamics embedded within LGBT communities, and within broader society - use of LGBT communities in the plural is just the start to this. There is no one community, just as there is no one experience of the commercial scene, so everyone needs to be aware of the potential pitfalls of over-simplification.

Of course many of the issues raised here warrant further exploration, but it is hoped that this report will support future thinking in this area, to which everyone will bring their own (multiple) perspectives, whether they be academics, practitioners and/or LGBT community members themselves.

## Appendix

This appendix provides further information about project participants.

A full breakdown of survey respondents' self-defined gender (Table 5) and sexual (Table 6) identities is provided below.

Table 5: Survey respondents' gender identity

Gender identity	No. of respondents	Grouped identities	No. of respondents
Female/woman	173	Female	189
Female mostly	6		
Cisgendered female/woman	5		
Female genderqueer	2		
Female, butch, gender non-conforming	1		
Female - post op	1		
Femme	1		
Male/man	161	Male	165
Masculine/mostly masculine	2		
Cisgendered male	1		
Male, of trans experience	1		
Trans female/woman	4	Trans	13
Trans	3		
Trans male/man	3		
M2F	1		
Transgender FTM	1		
Trans*, masculine	1		
Genderqueer	4	Genderqueer	8
Genderqueer trans* man	1		
Queer	1		
Queer dyke	1		
Queer woman (cis)	1		
Gender neutral	1	Gender neutral/genderless	2
I was born in a female body but I feel gender-less or somewhere in between male and female mostly	1		
I don't identify my gender	2	I don't identify my gender	2
I think there are two responses to this, one is geared towards outward projection of gender, the other is an internal gender identity. Outwardly I am most often male, inwardly I feel more akin to the notion of 'two spirit', how I perform this depends on the social situation	1	I think there are two responses to this, one is geared towards outward projection of gender, the other is an internal gender identity. Outwardly I am most often male, inwardly I feel more akin to the notion of 'two spirit', how I perform this depends on the social situation	1
Male and female	1	Male and female	1
Person	1	Person	1
Physical body	1	Physical body	1
Soft butch	1	Soft butch	1
Soon to be true female instead of intersex	1	Soon to be true female instead of intersex	1
Undisclosed	242	Undisclosed	242
<b>Total</b>	<b>627</b>		<b>627</b>

Table 6: Survey respondents' sexual identity

Sexual identity	No. of respondents	Grouped identities	No. of respondents
Gay	148	Gay (men and women)	176
Gay man	15		
Gay (woman) and/or lesbian	6		
Gay/queer or queer/gay	4		
Gay/faggot	1		
Gay female/queer	1		
Performatively gay	1		
Lesbian	103	Lesbian	115
Lesbian/bisexual	4		
Dyke	2		
Butch	1		
Lesbian (although life-long partner is about to transition) - not sure what that makes me? Pansexual?	1		
Lesbian (homoromantic, grey asexual)	1		
Lesbian, I see the word lesbian as only a form of language not a label, therefore I don't see it as labelling myself, but I guess you call a dog a dog for a reason right?	1		
Lesbian/queer	1	Bisexual	40
Trans lesbian	1		
Bisexual	33		
Bisexual/queer or queer/bisexual	5		
Bisexual/homoflexible	1		
Bisexual, polyamorous, submissive	1	Queer	20
Queer	16		
Queer (ex-long time lesbian, long term partner to trans man)	1		
Queer/lesbian/bi/not sure (it depends on how I feel that day)	1		
Queer, pansexual, lesbian	1		
Queer/polysexual	1	Heterosexual/straight	6
Heterosexual/straight	5		
FTM who loves women	1	Pansexual	5
Pansexual	4		
Pansexual/gay	1	Polysexual	4
Polysexual	2		
Polysexual/bisexual	2	Asexual	3
Asexual	3	Homosexual	3
Homosexual	3	I don't identify my sexuality	2
I don't identify my sexuality	2	Complicated	1
Complicated	1	Demisexual lesbian/queer	1
Demisexual lesbian/queer	1	Gay-identified automonosexualist	1
Gay-identified automonosexualist	1	Heteroflexible	1
Heteroflexible	1	I don't know	1
I don't know	1	LGBT	1
LGBT	1	My sexual feelings	1
My sexual feelings	1	Panromantic demisexual	1
Panromantic demisexual	1	Post-heterosexual	1
Post-heterosexual	1		

Sexual identity (continued)	No. of respondents	Grouped identities	No. of respondents
I am attracted physically and emotionally to individuals who are female and male so I would probably be categorized as bisexual. However (outside the constant classification of having 2 distinct and separate genders) I mostly am attracted to individuals who portray themselves / act similarly to me (e.g. androgynous tom-boys) so I think that an argument could be made for me to be mainly homosexual - as in I am attracted to people like me and not opposites (- which might be heterosexual?)	1	I am attracted physically and emotionally to individuals who are female and male so I would probably be categorized as bisexual. However (outside the constant classification of having 2 distinct and separate genders) I mostly am attracted to individuals who portray themselves / act similarly to me (e.g. androgynous tom-boys) so I think that an argument could be made for me to be mainly homosexual - as in I am attracted to people like me and not opposites (- which might be heterosexual?)	1
Undisclosed	243	Undisclosed	243
<b>Total</b>	<b>627</b>		<b>627</b>

Information about in-depth participants contained below is necessarily limited to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, however it is provided by way of context for the data drawn on throughout the report. Details are taken from oral information supplied and/or written 'demographic information sheets' that were given to participants. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 7: In-depth participants' gender and sexual identities

Involvement	Gender identity	Sexual identity
Individual and paired interviews	7 female	1 bisexual
		6 lesbian
	5 male	5 gay
	1 pan	pan
	1 trans	pansexual
Group discussions	14 female	1 bisexual
		4 gay
		5 lesbian
		4 undisclosed
	14 male	1 bisexual
		11 gay
		1 straight
		1 undisclosed
	1 'other'	gay
	1 trans	lesbian

### **Individual interviews**

BRYN has been involved in a national gay men's group for many years. He identified as 'pan' with regard to both his gender and sexuality. He is aged 55-64 and also participated in Group 2.

CARL is in his early 30s and lives in a small English town. He works in the public sector and is involved in an online LGB support project in his spare time. He identified as a gay man.

GEMMA is a lesbian in her early 30s and lives in Scotland, working for a relatively large LGBT organisation. When asked to describe her gender, Gemma commented "it depends what day it is. I'm happy to go down as female, but I think I would also put in there a caveat that non gender binary also sometimes applies".



HELEN is currently a postgraduate student. She has been involved in a number of LGBT-related campaigns and/or groups during her time as a student. She identifies as a woman and a queer lesbian / pansexual. She is in her early 20s and lives in a large city in the North of England.

JULIE identifies as female, lesbian and works for a small LGBT charity. Aged in her mid-late 20s she lives in a town in England which is 'deprived' according to the index of multiple deprivation. She also took part in Group 4.

LAURA is currently a mature student aged 45-54 and lives in a small relatively affluent town in England. She identifies as female and a lesbian. Her Christian faith was identified as important to her.

LIZ identifies as female and a lesbian. She is aged between 35 and 44, and described herself as a single parent. In her job she provides support to young people identifying as LGBT within a broader mental health service. She lives in a semi-rural county in England.

MATT is in his early 20s and recently graduated from university where he was actively involved in a number of LGBT groupings. He identified as male, cisgendered and gay. Matt lives in a socio-economically mixed English city.

PETRA is in her late 40s and lives in a large city in the South of England. She is currently a student and also involved in trans-related voluntary work. She described herself as trans and pansexual.

RUTH is in her mid-late 60s and identifies as female and a lesbian. She lives in an English city 'known' for its sizable LGBT population.

### **Paired interviews**

FIONA and BEN are colleagues employed by a relatively large LGBT organisation based in a Scottish city. Ben is aged 25-34 and identified as a gay man. Fiona is also aged 25-34 and identified as a woman and bisexual.

GERRY and SHOURJO are partners and live in a socio-economically mixed city in England. Gerry is employed within the arts and identifies as 'British Asian'. Shourjo migrated to England from India in adulthood and currently works in the public sector. They are both in their 30s and identify as gay men.

### **Group discussions**

GROUP ONE took place at a pre-existing LGB young people's support group. All group members knew each other. The group is based within a relatively deprived town in England (featuring in the 'top 50' of the 2010 index of multiple deprivation). Though most group members are drawn from the town, some travel from slightly further afield to be part of the group. Individuals involved were:

ALISON is involved in supporting the young LGB group.

ED supports the LGB youth group.

FIN is also involved in supporting the young LGB group.

GRAHAM supports young LGBT people within his job. He is in his late 20s and identifies as gay himself.

JASON is a young man who identifies as gay. He recently left school.

KERRY is also a young person and member of the LGB youth group.

MARK is an ex-student and member of the young LGB group. He identifies as gay.

GROUP TWO took place in a city within a mostly rural county of England. Not all the group members lived within the city itself but were also drawn from more rural neighbouring locations. It was not a pre-existing group so not all members knew each other. It consisted of the following individuals:

ANDREA is a practitioner working with LGBT communities and identifies as female and gay herself. She is in her early 20s.

BRYN (see individual interviews above).

EVA's professional role includes liaison with LGBT communities. She is female, aged 35-44 and did not disclose her sexuality.

PETER is semi-retired and has been involved in a variety of gay and/or LGBT groups over the years. He is male, gay, and aged over 65.

RACHEL is involved in trans support networks. She identifies as female, gay, and aged 35-44.

GROUP THREE took place not far from a large city known for its 'gay scene'. The group was drawn from the LGBT staff network of a large private sector organisation. Most, though not all, of the members had met previously. Group members were:

ADAM is male, gay, and aged 25-34.

JACKIE is in her early 50s, and identifies as a female lesbian.

LUCE is female, lesbian, and 35-44 years old.

MEGAN described herself as a female lesbian aged 25-34.

PAUL, aged 35-44, identifies as a gay man.

PHILIPPA described herself as a female lesbian aged 25-34.

TIMOTHY identifies as male, gay, and aged 35-44.

TONY described himself as male, gay, and 45-54 years old.

GROUP FOUR was conducted within a pre-existing support group for LGBT women, to which a number of additional individuals had been invited. Most participants knew each other. It was based within a relatively deprived town in England (featuring in the 'top 25' according to the 2010 index of multiple deprivation). Group members included:

COLIN is a gay man aged 35-44. He is involved in a trade union LGBT group.

CHARLIE is aged 25-34 and identified as male (trans) and bisexual.

JULIE (see individual interviews above).

LOUISA is aged between 45 and 54, and identified as female and "bi?".

JO, aged 25-34, is female and described herself as gay.

NICKY is a female lesbian, aged 25-34.

TOM identifies as male, straight, and aged 25-34.

GROUP FIVE took place in a city in Wales. It was not a pre-existing group, though some members knew each other. Individuals involved were:

DILYS is 45-54 years old, and described herself as gay and female. She works for an LGBT-related organisation.

HUW is male, gay, and described himself as 35-44 years old.

JODI identified as 'other' gender, gay, and aged 45-54.

PAULA, aged 35-44, described herself as "MtF trans" and lesbian.

STEVE is a gay man aged 55-64. He is involved in an LGBT staff network at his place of work.

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*Solidarity but not similarity? LGBT communities in the twenty-first century*

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